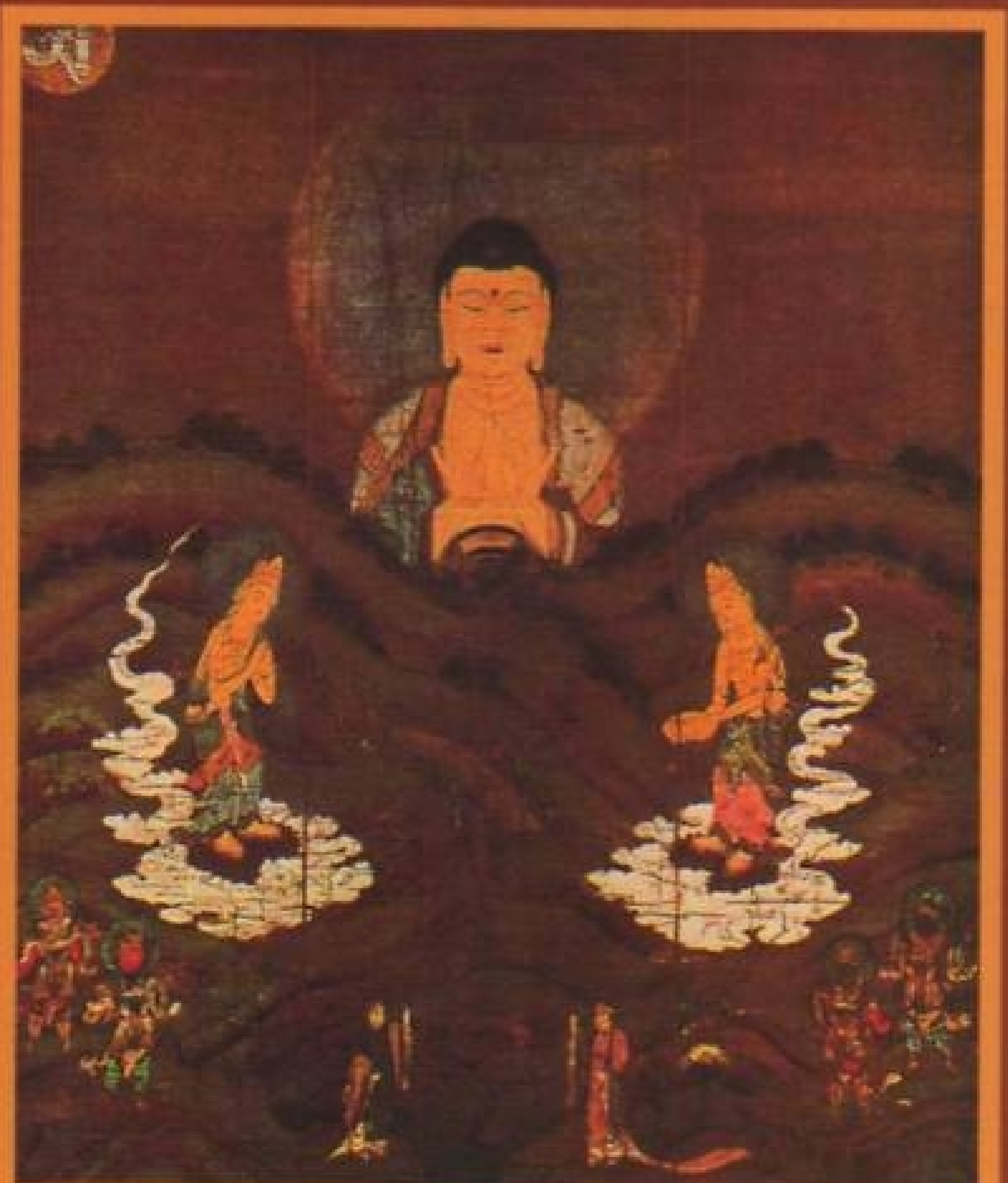
PURE-LAND ZEN
ZEN PURE-LAND

Letters from Patriarch Yin Kuang



Translated by Master Thích Thiền Tâm
Forrest Smith, editor

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Patriarch Yin Kuang

印光大師嘉言錄

Translated by Master Thích Thiền Tâm, et al
Forrest G. Smith, consulting editor

SUTRA TRANSLATION COMMITTEE OF
THE UNITED STATES AND CANADA
New York - San Francisco - Toronto

NOTE TO THE READER. This is an electronic version of the book "Pure-Land Zen, Zen Pure-Land" (second edition 1993*), which is a translation of selected passages from the letters of Elder Master Yin Kuang, the Thirteenth Patriarch of Pure Land. The original Chinese titles are *Yin Kuang Fa Shih Wen Ch'ao* and *Yin Kuang Ta Shih Chia Yen Lu*.
Except for the two pictures of Master Yin Kuang, nothing has been added or changed. However, the notes to the letters and the Glossary prepared by the Van Hien Study Group as well as the Appendix (*The Practices and Vows of the Bodhisattva Samantabhadra*) were left out, but will hopefully be added later on.

T.G., May 2005

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Contents

The supreme and endless blessings of Samantabhadra's deeds,
I now universally transfer.
May every living being, drowning and adrift,
Soon return to the Land of Limitless Light!

The Vows of Samantabhadra

About the author

The life of the Pure Land Patriarch YIN KUANG (1861-1940) covers a most eventful period for East Asia and parallels the Sino-Japanese War, the Chinese Revolution of 1911 and two world wars.

> The revolution of 1911 that toppled the Manchu dynasty and established the Republic of China also brought in its wake a number of problems for the Buddhist sangha [clergy]. Following the political revolution, an intellectual climate was ushered in that was unfriendly to the interests of Buddhism ... The attack and criticism against Buddhism ... resulted in a number of discriminatory measures, such as special taxes and contributions being levied on temples, monasteries being appropriated for use as barracks and police stations, tenants on temple lands being encouraged not to pay rent, and Buddhist images being destroyed ... (Kenneth Ch'en, *Buddhism in China*, p. 455ff.)

Against this backdrop, two eminent monks rose to lead the resurgence of Buddhism: Master T'ai Hsu, who was instrumental in the revival of the Mind-Only school and Master Yin Kuang, later to become the Thirteenth Patriarch of Pure Land.

> The monk mainly responsible for instilling new life and meaning to ... [the practice of Buddha Recitation and chanting of sutras was Master] Yin Kuang ... who, after his conversion to Pure Land pietism, concentrated on living a pure religious life based on faith, devotion and holiness ... [Master] Yin Kuang carried on his teachings mainly in the provinces of Kiangsu and Chekiang, where he gained numerous followers and disciples ... These efforts by [Master] Yin Kuang and his followers brought about an extensive revival of the Pure Land school. Lotus Societies, Nien-fo [Buddha Recitation] Societies, and others of a similar nature sprang up all over China. (Ibid.)

The compendium of Master Yin Kuang's letters – excerpts of which are translated in this book – represents a broad cross-section of the Master's thought and forms a prized collection of inspirational writings cherished throughout the Mahayana world. Scarcely a Chinese temple can be found anywhere without several different editions of these letters.

Diệu Phung
Minh Thành
P.D. Leigh

Festival of
Amitabha Buddha
Shepherd Park
Hartford, CT: 1992



Patriarch Yin Kuang (1861-1940)

Preface

After the demise of the historical Buddha, His teachings spread in two main directions, southward (Theravada tradition) and eastward into China, Vietnam, Korea, Japan (Mahayana tradition). In East Asia, these teachings developed into ten different schools, several of which remained important to this day: Zen, Tantric and Pure Land. Pure Land is by far the most widespread form of Buddhism in East Asia.

All these schools teach the same basic truth: "Do not what is evil, do what is good, keep the mind pure." True to this spirit, the Pure Land approach is simple and straightforward. Through *mindfulness of the Buddha* (i.e. Buddha Recitation), the practitioner can calm his mind and achieve samadhi and wisdom. Thus reborn in the Pure Land (i.e., in his pure Mind), he will eventually attain Buddhahood. This is also the core teaching, the very essence, of Zen and all other Mahayana schools. As D.T. Suzuki has pointed out, "the psychological effects of the repetition of the holy name are close to the effects of Zen meditation."

This notwithstanding, the main emphasis of the Pure Land school lies elsewhere. Pure Land provides a safety net, a refuge of last resort for everyone, through the compassion of Amitabha Buddha – through His Vows. Taken together, these two concepts of the Pure Land – as Mind and as a transcendental land – "effectively brought ... within the reach of all men the deliverance taught by Sakyamuni" (Allan A. Andrews).

But why do we have to purify the mind and seek deliverance? It is because in the wasteland of Birth and Death, subject to the three poisons of greed, anger and delusion, we all undergo suffering – the ultimate suffering being, of course, death. Echoing this conclusion, a well-known American professor made this observation about the motivation of Western Buddhists:

> Probably the majority of non-Orientals who become practicing Buddhists do so because of an overriding need for relief from suffering. Sometimes the suffering is physical, but more often it is emotional and often psychosomatic. The individual practicing meditation, chanting, or any kind of Buddhist "self-cultivation" is motivated by a need for symptomatic relief, mitigation of anxiety and depression, reduction of hostility ... (Emma McCloy Layman, *Buddhism in America*, p. 269)

This is precisely why Buddha Sakyamuni, when preaching the Four Noble Truths to Kaundinya and his friends, taught them first the Truth of Suffering. The letters of Master Yin Kuang address this issue squarely. If you are suffering *and* if you realistically discover that you have only average motivation, fortitude and self-discipline, then Pure Land is for you. Pure Land is about suffering and the *liberation* from suffering.

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This book consists of excerpts of selected letters by the Patriarch Yin Kuang [...]. Each letter can be considered a unit in itself [...]. Please note that in this text, the expressions “Buddha Recitation” and “Buddha’s name” refer specifically to Amitabha Buddha. [...]

Here, then, are the letters of the Patriarch Yin Kuang. We hope the Western reader will enjoy and benefit from them, as several generations of Eastern readers have. As a Zen Master has written in another context, “read them once, read them twice and look for the same thing that Bodhidharma brought to China: look for the print of the Mind.”

Van Hien Study Group
Festival of Samantabhadra
New York: 1992

There shall be no distinction, no regard to male or female, good or bad, exalted or lowly; none shall fail to be in his Land of Purity after having called, with complete faith, on Amida Buddha.

Honen Shonin (as quoted in
"Pure Land Buddhist Painting")

Introduction

The Pure Land Tradition

The goal of all Buddhist practice is to achieve Enlightenment and transcend the cycle of Birth and Death – that is, to attain Buddhahood. In the Mahayana tradition, the precondition for Buddhahood is the Bodhi Mind, the aspiration to achieve Enlightenment for the benefit of all sentient beings, oneself included.[1]

Since sentient beings are of different spiritual capacities and inclinations, many levels of teaching and numerous methods were devised in order to reach everyone. Traditionally, the sutras speak of 84,000, i.e., an infinite number of methods, depending on the circumstances, the times and the target audience. All these methods are expedients – different medicines for different individuals with different illnesses at different times – but all are intrinsically *perfect and complete*.[2] Within each method, the success or failure of an individual's cultivation depends on his depth of practice and understanding, that is, on his mind.

A) Self-power, other-power

Throughout history, the Patriarchs have elaborated various systems to categorize Dharma methods and the sutras in which they are expounded. One convenient division is into methods based on self-effort (*self-power*) and those that rely on the assistance of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas (*other-power*).[3]

Traditionally, most Buddhist schools and methods take the *self-power* approach: progress along the path of Enlightenment is achieved only through intense and sustained personal effort.[4] Because of the dedication and effort involved, schools of this self-power, self-effort tradition all have a distinct monastic bias. The laity has generally played only a supportive role, with the most spiritually advanced ideally joining the Order of monks and nuns. Best known of these traditions are Theravada and Zen.

Parallel to this, particularly following the development of Mahayana thought and the rise of lay Buddhism, a more flexible tradition eventually arose, combining self-power with *other-power* – the assistance and support provided by the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas to sincere seekers of the Way. Most representative of this tradition are the Esoteric and Pure Land schools. However, unlike the former (or Zen), Pure Land does not stress the master-disciple relationship and de-emphasizes the role of sub-schools, roshis/gurus and rituals. Moreover, the main aim of Pure Land – rebirth in the Land of Ultimate Bliss through the power of Amitabha Buddha's

Vows – is a realistic goal, though to be understood at several levels. Therein lies the appeal and strength of Pure Land.[5]

B) Pure Land in a Nutshell

Pure Land, like all Mahayana schools, requires first and foremost the development of the Bodhi Mind,[6] the aspiration to attain Buddhahood for the benefit of all sentient beings. From this starting point, the main tenets of the school can be understood at two main levels, the transcendental and the popular – depending on the background and the capacities of the cultivator.

i) In its popular form, i.e., for ordinary practitioners in this spiritually Degenerate Age, some twenty-six centuries after the demise of the historical Buddha, Pure Land involves seeking rebirth in the Land of Amitabha Buddha. This is achieved within one lifetime through the practice of Buddha Recitation *with sincere faith and vows*, leading to one-pointedness of mind or samadhi.

> The devotees of this school venerated Amitabha Buddha and sought not outright Nirvana but rebirth in the ... "Pure Land" of Amitabha, also called Sukhavati. In that idyllic environment, no new negative karmic accumulations would be created and all existing ones would evaporate. Nirvana would be therefore just a short step away. (J. Snelling, The Buddhist Handbook, p. 133-4.)

Thus, at the popular level, the Pure Land of Amitabha Buddha is an ideal training ground, an ideal environment where the practitioner is reborn thanks both to his own efforts and the power of Amitabha Buddha's vows (other-power).[7] No longer subject to retrogression, having left Birth and Death behind forever, the cultivator can now focus all his efforts toward the ultimate aim of Buddhahood. This aspect of Pure Land is the form under which the school is popularly known.[8]

ii) At the advanced level, i.e., for cultivators of high spiritual capacity, the Pure Land method, like other methods, reverts the ordinary, deluded mind to the Self-Nature True Mind.[9] In the process, wisdom and Buddhahood are eventually attained. This is exemplified by the following advice of the eminent Zen master Chu Hung (Jap. Shuko), one of the three "Dragon-Elephants" of 16th-17th century China:

> Right now you simply must recite the buddha-name with purity and illumination. Purity means reciting the buddha-name without any other thoughts. Illumination means reflecting back as you recite the buddha-name. Purity is *sammata*, "stopping." Illumination is *vipasyana*, "observing." Unify your mindfulness of buddha through buddha-name recitation, and stopping and observing are both present. (J.C. Cleary, *Pure Land, Pure Mind.*)

As stated in *Buddhism of Wisdom and Faith* (Section 18):

> If we have the roots and the temperament of Mahayana followers, we should naturally understand that the goal of Buddha Recitation is to achieve Buddhahood ... Why is it that the goal of Buddha Recitation is to become a Buddha?

> It is because, as we begin reciting, the past, present and future have lost their distinction, marks exist but they have been left behind, form is emptiness, thought is the same as No-Thought, the realm of the Original Nature "apart from thought" of the Tathagata has been penetrated. This state is Buddhahood; what else could it be?

This high-level form of Pure Land is practiced by those of deep spiritual capacities: "when the mind is pure, the Buddha land is pure ... to recite the Buddha's name is to recite the Mind." Thus, at the advanced level, Pure Land *is* Zen, Zen *is* Pure Land.[10]

In its totality, Pure Land reflects the highest teaching of Buddhism as expressed in the *Avatamsaka Sutra*: mutual identity and interpenetration, the simplest method contains the ultimate and the ultimate is found in the simplest.[11]

C) Faith, Vows and Practice

These three factors are the cornerstones of Pure Land Buddhism. If they are present, rebirth in the Pure Land is achieved. *Faith* means faith in Amitabha Buddha's Vow to rescue all who recite His name, as well as faith in one's own Self-Nature, which is intrinsically the same as His (to recite the Buddha's name is to recite the Mind). *Vows* are the determination to be reborn in the Pure Land – in one's pure Mind – so as to be in the position to save oneself and others. *Practice* generally means reciting the Buddha's name to the point where one's Mind and that of Amitabha Buddha are in unison – i.e., to the point of singlemindedness. Samadhi and wisdom are then achieved.

Please note that all Buddhist teachings are expedients, dividing the one and indivisible Truth into many parts. Faith, Vows and Practice, although three, are really one. Thus, it can be said that rebirth in the Pure Land depends on three conditions or two conditions (Faith and Vows) or even one condition (Faith), as the one contains all and all is contained in the one. The formula to be used depends on the audience and the times. The aim is to enable sentient beings to achieve rebirth in the Pure Land as a steppingstone toward Buddhahood.

D) Transference of Merit

Central to the Pure Land tradition is the figure of the Bodhisattva Dharmakara, the future Amitabha Buddha, who came to exemplify the Bodhisattva ideal and the doctrine of dedication of merit.[12] This merit transference is the source of the vow-power, or other-power, in Pure Land Buddhism.

> The Mahayana idea of the Buddha being able to impart his power to others marks one of those epoch-making deviations which set off the Mahayana from so-called ... original Buddhism ... The Mahayanists accumulate stocks of merit not only for the material of their own enlightenment but for the general

> cultivation of merit which can be shared equally by their fellow-beings, animate and inanimate. This is the true meaning of Parinamana, that is, turning one's merit over to others for their spiritual interest. (D.T. Suzuki, tr., *The Lankavatara Sutra*, p. xix.)

The rationale for such conduct, which on the surface appears to run counter to the law of Cause and Effect, may be explained in the following passage concerning one of the three Pure Land sages, the Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara (Kuan Yin):

> Some of us may ask whether the effect of karma can be reverted by repeating the name of Kuan-Yin. This question is tied up with that of rebirth in Sukhavati [the Pure Land] and it may be answered by saying that invocation of Kuan-Yin's name forms another cause which will right away offset the previous karma. We know, for example, that if there is a dark, heavy cloud above, the chances are that it will rain. But we also know that if a strong wind should blow, the cloud will be carried away somewhere else and we will not feel the rain. Similarly, the addition of one big factor can alter the whole course of karma ...
>
> It is only by accepting the idea of life as one whole that both Theravadins and Mahayanists can advocate the practice of transference of merit to others. With the case of Kuan-Yin then, by calling on Her name we identify ourselves with Her and as a result of this identification Her merits flow over to us. These merits which are now ours then counterbalance our bad karma and save us from calamity. The law of cause and effect still stands good. All that has happened is that a powerful and immensely good karma has overshadowed the weaker one ... (Lecture on Kuan Yin by Tech Eng Soon – Penang Buddhist Association, c. 1960. Pamphlet.)

This concept of transference of merit, which presupposes a receptive mind on the part of the cultivator, is emphasized in Pure Land. However, the concept also exists, albeit in embryonic form, in the Theravada tradition, as exemplified in the beautiful story of the Venerable Angulimala.[13]

E) Faith and Mind

Faith is an important component of Pure Land Buddhism.[14] However, wisdom or Mind also plays a crucial, if less visible, role. This interrelationship is clearly illustrated in the *Meditation Sutra*: the worst sinner, guilty of matricide and parricide, etc. may still achieve rebirth in the Pure Land if, on the verge of death, he concentrates on the Buddha's name one to ten times with utmost faith and sincerity.

This passage can be understood at two levels. At the *level of everyday life*, just as the worst criminal once genuinely reformed is no longer a threat to society and may be pardoned, the sinner once truly repentant may, through the vow-power of Amitabha Buddha, achieve rebirth in the Pure Land – albeit at the *lowest* grade. Thus, Pure Land offers hope to everyone; yet at the same time, the law of Cause

and Effect remains valid.

At the *level of principle or Mind*, as the Sixth Patriarch taught in the *Platform Sutra*:

> A foolish passing thought makes one an ordinary man, while an enlightened second thought makes one a Buddha.

Therefore, once the sinner repents and concentrates on the Buddha's name with utmost sincerity and one-pointedness of mind, *for that moment* he becomes an awakened person silently merging into the stream of the Sages – can Enlightenment and Buddhahood then be that far away?[15] As the *Meditation Sutra* states: "the Land of Amitabha Buddha is not far from here!"[16]

Van Hien Study Group / 1992
Festival of the Bodhisattva Kuan-Yin

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(1) See the following passage, by the late founder of the Buddhist Lodge and Buddhist Society (London), on the true goal of all Buddhist practice:

> In the West, the need for some guidance in mind-development was made acute ... by a sudden spate of books which were, whatever the motive of their authors, dangerous in the extreme. No word was said in them of the sole right motive for mind-development, the enlightenment of the meditator for the benefit of all mankind, and the reader was led to believe that it was quite legitimate to study and practice mindfulness, and the higher stages which ensue, for the benefit of business efficiency and the advancement of personal prestige. In these circumstances, *Concentration and Meditation*, ... was compiled and published by the [British] Buddhist Society, with constant stress on the importance of right motive, and ample warning of the dangers, from a headache to insanity, which lie in wait for those who trifle with the greatest force on earth, the human mind. (Christmas Humphreys, *The Buddhist Way of Life*, p. 100.)

(2) Since every method is an expedient, adapted to a particular target audience, each one is perfect and complete for a given person or group at a given time. See also the following passage from D.T. Suzuki:

> Buddhist theology has a fine comprehensive theory to explain the manifold types of experience in Buddhism, which look so contradictory to each other. In fact the history of Chinese Buddhism is a series of attempts to reconcile the diverse schools ... Various ways of classification and reconciliation were offered, and ... their conclusion was this: Buddhism supplies us with so many gates to enter into the truth because of such a variety of human characters and temperaments and environments due to diversities of karma. This is plainly depicted and taught by the Buddha himself when he says that the same water

> drunk by the cow and the cobra turns in one case into nourishing milk and in the other into deadly poison, and that medicine is to be given according to disease. This is called the doctrine of [skillful] means ... (*The Eastern Buddhist*, Vol. 4, No. 2, p. 121.)

(3) The crucial role of *other-power* in Buddhist cultivation is emphasized in the *Lankavatara* and *Avatamsaka Sutras*, among others.

(4) See the following passage from D.T. Suzuki:

> Jiriki (self-power) is the ... [wisdom] aspect of enlightenment and tariki (other-power) is the ... [Great Compassion] aspect of the same. By [wisdom] we transcend the principle of individuation, and by [Great Compassion] we descend into a world of particulars. The one goes upwards while the other comes downwards, but this is our intellectual way of understanding and interpreting enlightenment, in whose movement however there is no such twofold direction discernible. (*The Eastern Buddhist*, Vol. 3. No. 4, p. 314.)

(5) Historically, the roots of Pure Land go back to Ancient India, albeit the tradition was not emphasized there:

> Although a cult dedicated to Amitabha Buddha worship did arise in India, piety toward this Buddha seems to have been merely one of many practices of early Mahayana Buddhism. (Elizabeth ten Grotenhuis, in Joji Okazaki, *Pure Land Buddhist Painting*, p. 14.)

Note: An early form of Buddha Recitation can be found in the *Nikayas* of the Pali Canon:

> In the Nikayas, the Buddha ... advised his disciples to think of him and his virtues as if they saw his body before their eyes, whereby they would be enabled to accumulate merit and attain Nirvana or be saved from transmigrating in the evil paths ... (D.T. Suzuki, *The Eastern Buddhist*, Vol. 3, No. 4, p. 317.)

For details, see Glossary, "Pure Land School."

(6) See the following passage on Bodhisattva practice, from the "Practices and Vows of the Bodhisattva Samantabhadra":

> Because of living beings, they bring forth great compassion. From great compassion the Bodhi Mind is born; and because of the Bodhi Mind, they accomplish Supreme, Perfect Enlightenment. (*Avatamsaka Sutra*, ch. 40. See Appendix.)

(7) The text of the Primal (Eighteenth) Vow is as follows:

> If, after my obtaining Buddhahood, all beings in the ten quarters should desire *in sincerity and trustfulness* to be born in my country, and if they should not be born by only thinking of me for ten times ... may I not attain the highest Enlightenment. (*Meditation Sutra*, quoted by Elizabeth ten Grotenhuis, op. cit., p. 15.)

(8) Professor Allan A. Andrews has noted that there are two levels of the Pure Land practice, which have co-existed in China since the fourth century, beginning with the first two Patriarchs:

> Hui-yan used [Buddha Recitation] to achieve prajna wisdom by his own self-efforts. T'an-luan considered [Buddha Recitation] the best practice for salvation, that is, for rebirth, because [it] is the easiest practice through the power of Amida's compassionate vows. ("Nembutsu in the Chinese Pure Land tradition." In *The Eastern Buddhist*, Vol. 3, No. 2, p. 40.)

Please note that understanding the dual nature of the Pure Land, as Mind-Only and as a separate entity, requires meditation and recitation – not intellectual reasoning.

> In secular western thought, awareness of psychological projection as a source of supernatural being has served to demythologize demons, goblins, angels and saints and rob them of their power. The Bardo Thodol [Tibetan Book of the Dead], however, speaks of the deities as "projections" but never as "mere projections." The deities are present and must be dealt with religiously ... not just by intellectual insight. (D.G. Dawe in *The Perennial Dictionary of World Religions*, p. 93.)

(9) For details, see *Buddhism of Wisdom and Faith*, section 29.

The ordinary, deluded mind (thought) includes feelings, impressions, conceptions, consciousness, etc. The True Mind is the fundamental nature, the Original Face, Reality, the Buddha Nature, etc. The True Mind is to the ordinary mind what water is to waves – the two cannot be dissociated. They are the same but they are also different. All methods of cultivation aim at calming the waves, restoring the water to its original stillness. The surface then becomes a mirror, reflecting everything. This is wisdom or Enlightenment.

The practice of meditation (samatha/vipasyana), in one form or another, is the basis of cultivation in all Buddhist traditions, including Pure Land.

(10) See the following passage from D.T. Suzuki:

> We observe that even the extremely devotional form of Buddhist life as revealed in the [Pure Land] begins in its last stage of "spiritual rest" ... to approach the Zen type. Indeed here lies the unity of Buddhist experience throughout its varied expressions. (D.T. Suzuki, *The Eastern Buddhist*, Vol. 4, No. 2, p. 121.)

(11) The *Avatamsaka Sutra* teaches the interpenetration of all dharmas – the smallest dharma contains the largest and vice versa. As a modern example, a single computer chip can contain numerous books. This teaching is clearly expressed in chapter 26 of the sutra, which describes the last phases of practice of a Bodhisattva before final Buddhahood. In that chapter, it is taught that at each and every stage, the actions of the Bodhisattva "never go beyond Buddha Recitation":

> This is a summary of the tenth stage of enlightening beings, called Cloud of Teaching ... Whatever acts they undertake, whether through giving, or kind speech, of beneficial action, or cooperation, it is all never apart from thoughts of Buddha [Buddha Recitation], the Teaching, the Community ... (Thomas Cleary, tr., *The Flower Ornament Scripture [Avatamsaka Sutra]*, Vol. II, p. 111.)

(12) See the following passage:

> The [Longer Amitabha Sutra] ... which was in existence before a.d. 200, describes a discourse offered by the Buddha Sakyamuni ... in response to questions of his disciple Ananda. Sakyamuni tells the story of the Bodhisattva Dharmakara, who had for eons past been deeply moved by the suffering of sentient beings and who had determined to establish a Land of Bliss where all beings could experience emancipation from their pain ... In the presence of the eighty-first Buddha of the past, Lokesvararaja, Dharmakara made forty-eight vows relating to this Paradise, and promised that he would not accept enlightenment if he could not achieve his goals ... When, after countless ages, Dharmakara achieved enlightenment and became a Buddha, the conditions of his [18th] vow were fulfilled: he became the Lord of Sukhavati, the Western Paradise, where the faithful will be reborn in bliss, there to progress through stages of increasing awareness until they finally achieve enlightenment. (Elizabeth ten Grotenhuis, in Joji Okazaki, *Pure Land Buddhist Painting*, p. 14-15.)

(13) The life story of the Venerable Angulimala is one of the most moving accounts in the Theravada canon. After killing ninety-nine persons, Angulimala was converted by the Buddha, repented his evil ways and joined the Order:

> One day as he went on his round for alms he saw a woman in labor. Moved by compassion, he reported this pathetic woman's suffering to the Buddha. He then advised him to pronounce the following words of truth, which later became known as the Angulimala Paritta (Mantra) ... "Sister, since my birth in the Arya clan [i.e., since my ordination] I know not that I consciously destroyed the life of any living being. By this truth may you be whole and may your child be whole."
>
> He went to the presence of the suffering sister ... and uttered these words. Instantly, she delivered the child with ease. (Narada Maha Thera, *The Buddha and His Teaching*, p. 124.)

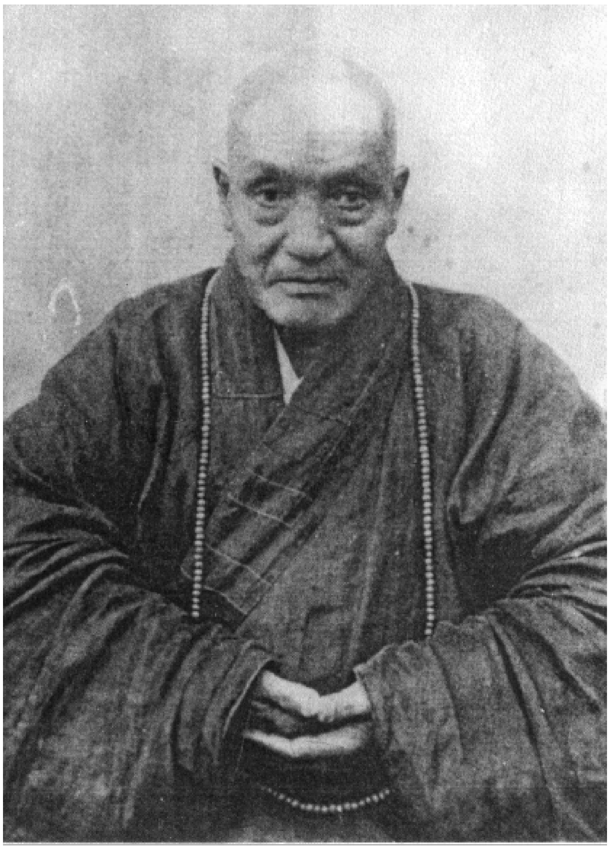
(14) Faith is an important element in all Buddhist traditions, but it is particularly so in Pure Land. See the following passage from the *Avatamsaka Sutra*:

> Faith is the basis of the path, the mother of virtues,
> Nourishing and growing all good ways ...
> Faith can increase knowledge and virtue;
> Faith can assure arrival at enlightenment.
> (Thomas Cleary, tr., *The Flower Ornament Scripture*, vol. 1, p. 331.)

(15) This is true at the level of noumenon or principle. At the level of phenomena, there are infinite degrees of Enlightenment, from those of the sages to the Supreme, Perfect Enlightenment of the Buddhas. (A Buddha is one who is completely enlightened at all times.)

(16) The strength and pervasiveness of Pure Land teaching are such that its main practice, Buddha Recitation, is found in other schools, including the Tantric and Zen schools. In Pure Land, Buddha Recitation is practiced for the purpose of achieving rebirth in the Land of Amitabha Buddha. In the Tantric school, the immediate aim is to destroy evil karma and afflictions and generate blessings and wisdom in the current lifetime. In Zen, the koan of Buddha Recitation is meant to sever delusive thought and realize the Self-Nature True Mind. The ultimate goal of all three schools is, of course, the same: to achieve Enlightenment and Buddhahood.

Letters from Patriarch Yin Kuang



From all delusions, karma, and demon-states,
Amid all worldly paths, I will be freed,
As the lotus does not touch the water,
As sun and moon do not stop in space.

The Vows of Samantabhadra

Letter 1

Turn Afflictions into Bodhi[1]

Since we last met, six years have gone by in a flash. During that time, not only have the snow and dew undergone change, the destiny of our nation has been profoundly transformed as well. The evanescence of life is truly something we all deeply mourn!

I am pleased to learn from your letter that you have not neglected your Pure Land practice. However, you indicated that you are not at peace in body and mind. Could this be the result of financial difficulties or chronic illness?

If you suffer financial hardship, I suggest you retreat a step. You should reflect thus: "although there are many in this world more fortunate than I, those who are less well off are hardly few in number. I should seek only to escape hunger and cold; why dream of riches and honor?"

Moreover, if you are content and at peace with your circumstances and surroundings, you can even turn afflictions into Bodhi (Enlightenment), not to mention grief into peace and joy!

If you suffer chronic illness, you should reflect deeply that this body is the very source of suffering, develop a revulsion toward it and strive to cultivate the Pure Land path, determined to achieve rebirth in the Land of Ultimate Bliss. The Buddhas view suffering as their teacher, thus achieving Ultimate Enlightenment. Likewise, you should consider illness as medicine, to escape Birth and Death.

You should realize that human beings are bound by all kinds of karmic afflictions. Without the sufferings of poverty and illness, they will, by nature, pursue the world of sight and sound, fame and profit, finding it difficult to let go. Who would then willingly turn around to watch and ponder the state of perdition to come?

The sage Mencius once said:

> Those who will be entrusted with great tasks should first endure hardship both in body and mind, suffering hunger and destitution or failure in their undertakings. Only then will they be able to forge their character, develop patience and endurance and attain outstanding abilities, beyond the ken of the multitude.

[1]Letter to Teng Po-ch'eng. (Chinese ed. Vol. I, p. 37)

Therefore, you should realize that human character is usually forged in adversity. If adversity cannot be avoided, you should remain at peace and practice forbearance.

Moreover, in speaking of great tasks, the sage Mencius was referring merely to mundane undertakings. Even so, enduring hardship is necessary for success – how much more so when lowly beings such as ourselves undertake the great dual task of achieving Buddhahood and rescuing sentient beings! If you are not tested to a certain extent by financial hardship and disease, your worldly delusions will know no bounds and your Pure Land practice will be difficult to perfect. With your Mind-mirror clouded, you will revolve for many eons in the evil realms – not knowing when you will ever achieve liberation!

The ancients have said:

> If it were not for a period of penetrating cold, the plum blossom could never develop its exquisite perfume!

This is the meaning of what I said earlier.

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You should persevere in reciting the Buddha's name, to eradicate past karma swiftly and avoid developing a mind of afflictions, resenting the Heavens, blaming your fellow beings, considering the law of Cause and Effect as a fairy tale and rejecting the Buddhas and their teachings as ineffective. You should know that from time immemorial, we have all created immeasurable evil karma. As the *Avatamsaka Sutra* states:

> If evil karma had physical form, the empty space of the ten directions could not contain it.

Thus, how can haphazard, intermittent cultivation possibly annihilate all afflictions and obstructions?

Sakyamuni Buddha and Amitabha Buddha, out of compassion for sentient beings who lack the strength to rid themselves of evil karma, specifically taught the method of "relying on the Buddha's power to take their residual karma along to the Pure Land." Such compassionate action is all-encompassing; even our obligations to the Heavens or to our parents cannot be compared to it – not even on a scale of ten thousand to one. Therefore, you should engage in earnest repentance, seeking the Buddhas' assistance in eradicating past karma and achieving peace and tranquility of body and mind.

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If illness and suffering become unbearable, in addition to reciting the Buddha's name morning and night and dedicating the merits toward rebirth in the Pure Land, you should call wholeheartedly upon the Bodhisattva Kuan Yin (Avalokitesvara). With Her silent vow to rescue sentient beings, the Bodhisattva appears throughout the worlds of the ten directions. If in time of crisis, a person can keep reciting Her name and revere Her, She will respond according to the circumstances, enabling him to escape suffering and achieve happiness.

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Although Buddha Recitation is simple, it is very deep and encompassing. The most important thing is to be utterly sincere and earnest, for only then will your thoughts merge with those of Amitabha Buddha and will you reap true benefits in this very life. If you are lazy and lax, lacking even the least bit of reverence and awe, you may sow the seeds of future liberation but you must still bear the inconceivable evil karma stemming from disrespect and over-familiarity. Even if, thanks to residual merits, you escape the evil realms, you will still find it difficult to join the Ocean-Wide Lotus Assembly!

Nowadays, there are quite a number of scholars who study Buddhism. However, almost all of them simply read the words of the sutras and commentaries seeking arguments and rationalizations to prove that they are versed in the Dharma. Those with the sincerity and devotion to cultivate according to the Dharma are few indeed! I have always said that to reap the real benefit of the Dharma, you should approach it with a truly reverent mind. One-tenth of reverence and devotion annihilates one-tenth of afflictions and evil karma, and increases merit and wisdom by one-tenth – and this applies to two-tenths, three-tenths or total reverence and devotion.

Conversely, the more lax and disrespectful you are, the more obstructions and evil karma you develop, resulting in a corresponding decrease in merit and wisdom. How sad it is! When you meet with other laymen, you should counsel them along these lines. This would be a great Dharma gift.

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If you can penetrate the profound, subtle meaning of the Pure Land method, so much the better. However, even if you are not entirely clear about certain aspects of it, you should still believe firmly in the words of the Buddhas and the Patriarchs. You must not harbor doubts. To doubt is to turn your back on Buddha Amitabha, distancing yourself from Him, making it difficult to be in communion with Him and be "received and guided" at the time of death. The ancients have taught:

> Only the Buddhas can truly fathom the ultimate meaning of Pure Land; even those Bodhisattvas who have achieved near equality with the Buddhas cannot grasp it completely.

If even the highest level Bodhisattvas cannot fully understand the Pure Land method, how can we expect to assess it with our own limited minds and capacities without falling into error? Intelligent persons, these days, may study the Dharma, but since they have not been in the company of fully enlightened sages, they almost always emphasize theory and noumenon (principle) while rejecting "phenomenal" cultivation as well as the law of Cause and Effect. Little do they realize that without phenomenal cultivation and belief in Cause and Effect, theory and noumenon cease to exist.

There are also certain individuals of great talent and ability, whose writings can astound the gods. However, their actions are no different from those of the dullards in the marketplace. The root cause is their rejection of phenomenal cultivation and Cause and Effect. This grave error is repeated by other people; it is a case of betraying the Dharma with one's body (actions). The depth of such offenses and transgressions is immeasurable! Witnessing this, those endowed with profound wisdom can only sigh in pity and compassion ...

An Elder Master once said:

> Those who skillfully discourse on Mind and Self-Nature surely can never reject Cause and Effect; those who believe deeply in Cause and Effect naturally understand the Mind and Self-Nature in depth. This is a natural development.

The Master's words are a truth that has withstood the test of time, a needle pricking the heads of those with delusive wisdom.

Last autumn, during your esteemed brother's visit to P'u T'o Mountain, I brought up these "sincere, respectful" points. However, I wonder whether he has taken them as the sincere, earnest words they were meant to be?

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Letter 2

A Pure Mind in a Pure Land[2]

How delighted I was to receive and read your letter! The sage Ch'u Po-yu, upon reaching his fiftieth birthday, looked back and realized the errors he was still committing at age forty-nine. When nearing seventy, Confucius expressed the wish to survive much longer in order to study the *Book of Changes* in depth and thus avoid major transgressions.

The scholarship of these sages had reached the highest level of mind and thought. Today's scholars like to study chapter by chapter, with few showing concern for the issue of rectifying mind and thought. Thus, they peruse books all day long without understanding the true intent of the sages, their words and actions differing from those of the sages as greatly as day from night or square from round. There is no possible correspondence. We are not even speaking here of the transgressions of mind and thought; if these transgressions were enumerated, the list would be endless!

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Buddhist sutras teach followers to practice repentance constantly in order to transcend delusion and achieve Buddhahood. Thus, even the Bodhisattva Maitreya, who has attained the level of Equal Enlightenment, still pays respect to the Buddhas of the ten directions during the six periods of the day, so as to wipe out delusion and attain the Dharma Body. If this is true for the Bodhisattva Maitreya, what can we say of common beings filled with heavy karmic afflictions?

If you do not feel shame and remorse, your Self-Nature may be the same as the Buddhas', but it is hidden by afflictions and evil karma and cannot manifest itself. Just like a precious mirror which has been covered with dust for eons, not only does it not reflect light, even its reflecting nature is hidden. If you realize that the mirror already possesses the nature of brightness and strive ceaselessly to clean it, the light reflected will gradually increase until it reaches maximum radiance. The mirror can then become, once more, something of value in the world.

[2] Another letter to Teng Po-ch'eng. (Chinese ed. Vol. I, p. 41)

You should realize that the potential for reflection is inherent in the mirror and is not the result of polishing. If it were not so, a brick would also shine brightly when polished. Yet, you should also realize that although the brightness is inherent in the mirror, without polishing, the day would never come when it would gleam.

The Mind-Nature of sentient beings is similar. Although it is *intrinsically* identical to that of the Buddhas, [it is clouded]. Thus, if sentient beings do not mend their ways, from evil to wholesome, and turn their backs on worldly dusts "to merge with Enlightenment," their inherently virtuous nature cannot appear. Such a mind-consciousness, inherently possessing the Buddha Nature in full but busily creating evil karma and suffering – mired in Birth and Death for many eons – is no different from a dark house filled with treasures. You not only cannot make use of the treasures, you may, in fact, suffer further loss. Is this not lamentable?

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Pure Land is precisely the sublime method enabling the practitioner to turn his back on worldly dusts to merge with Enlightenment and return to the source (the Mind). Laymen bound up in mundane affairs cannot easily find the time to attend retreats, practice meditation and recite the sutras. This method is, therefore, very suitable for persons such as yourself. Each one can pay respect to the Buddhas and recite sutras or Buddha Amitabha's name according to individual circumstances and capacities, dedicating the merits thus accrued to rebirth in the Pure Land. In addition to your regular cultivation sessions, you should practice Buddha Recitation when walking or standing, reclining or sitting, speaking or remaining silent, eating or dressing, throughout the day, wherever you may be.

When venerating the Buddhas in clean places, you may recite either aloud or silently. In dirty places (such as washrooms) or in circumstances that do not call for reverence (such as sleeping or bathing) you should just recite silently. To recite aloud when reclining is not only disrespectful, it is also fatiguing and may lead in time to illness. Silent recitation brings the same blessings and virtues as oral recitation, as long as it is distinct, earnest and not subject to distractions.

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You already know that you must confess your transgressions and practice repentance. This is very much in accord with the Pure Land method because "when the mind is pure, the Buddha land is pure." However, once having repented, you should change your ways and practice wholesome deeds, lest your repentance consist of empty words bringing no real benefit. This is also true if you wish to be free of external attachments in order to concentrate on Buddha Recitation and reach

one-pointedness of mind. No extraordinary method is required: you should paste the single word "death" on your forehead or dangle it from your eyebrows, always keeping the following thoughts in mind:

> Since time immemorial I have created untold, immeasurable evil karma; if such karma had form, the empty space of the ten directions could not contain it. Thanks to good conditions, I have been reborn in a human body and have, in addition, had the opportunity to hear the Dharma. However, given my evil karma, I must now recite the Buddha's name singlemindedly, seeking rebirth in the Pure Land. Otherwise, when my breath has ceased, [I am bound to endure the sufferings of hells, hungry ghosts and animality]. After recovering a human body, I would lack intelligence and be deluded, prone to create evil karma, unable to perform good deeds readily. In no time, I would sink deeper into the evil realms. With my residual bad karma from previous lives still not repaid, I would commit new evil karma, constantly revolving along the Six Paths throughout eons as numerous as motes of dust – hopelessly lost in the immense sea of suffering, not knowing how to reach liberation.

If you always reflect on these points, your cultivation will be focussed. Take the example of the two notorious men who – on the verge of death – witnessed the marks of hell appear, whereupon they recited the Buddha's name several times *with utmost sincerity and devotion*. Immediately, they saw Amitabha Buddha coming to "receive and guide" them back to the Pure Land. This beneficial feature exists only in the Pure Land method, out of all the countless methods taught by Sakyamuni Buddha throughout His teaching career. Therefore, I have always said that "if the Nine Realms of sentient beings do not practice this method, they cannot easily perfect the fruits of Enlightenment, while if the Buddhas of the ten directions abandon this method, they cannot benefit the masses far and wide."

If you have utmost Faith and cultivate earnestly, seeking escape from Birth and Death, then even though you still have not left the evil, deluded world, you will not remain long in the Saha World either. While you may not have reached the Pure Land yet, you will soon be a new guest in the Land of Ultimate Bliss.

From now on, when you meet virtuous persons, do your utmost to emulate them; when you encounter an opportunity to practice good deeds, do not hesitate. How can you have the heart to procrastinate, lest the error of one moment lead to ten thousand lifetimes of regret? Surely those with high aspirations cannot tolerate being "walking corpses," running aimlessly while alive and simply decaying after death, along with the grass and trees. Redouble your efforts and exert yourself!

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Finally, while the key to rebirth in the Pure Land is singlemindedness, you, as a layman, still have your parents and your family. Although you should not unduly seek wealth and honor, you should still fulfill your family obligations –

for to cultivate the Dharma is not to abandon everything. If you could let go of everything and still manage to provide for your parents and family, that would be all to the good. Otherwise, it would be contrary not only to human morality but also to the Dharma. This is something you should also realize.

As a filial son, you should counsel your parents concerning cultivation, so that they may practice Buddha Recitation and seek rebirth in the Pure Land. If they can practice with faith, they will surely achieve rebirth. Once reborn, they will transcend the mundane and enter sagehood, escape Birth and Death, join the Ocean-wide Assembly, be close to Amitabha Buddha and eventually achieve Buddhahood. Mundane filiality cannot be compared with such an achievement!

If anyone were to advise others to cultivate the Pure Land method, the merits and virtues from such teaching would be entirely his. In the future, he would surely be reborn in the upper lotus grades.

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Letter 3

The True Mark Vehicle has no Marks[3]

It is very difficult indeed to respond to the important questions raised in your letter. Why? It is because your aspirations are lofty while my knowledge is limited and meager. Loftiness and meagerness cannot meet; therefore, my teaching will not be appropriate to your needs!

However, in the True Mark Single Vehicle, the marks of loftiness and meagerness cannot be found. Within this Vehicle, whether the marks are lofty or limited depends on how they are conceived. Loftiness and meagerness always possess in full the nature of the Dharma Realm. Moreover, the meagerness to which I refer encompasses all the dharmas of the Ten Realms.

The Pure Land Patriarch Shan Tao has said:

> If you wish to study "meaning," [understand the Dharma] you should study all dharmas, from the mundane level to the level of the Buddhas. However, if you want to engage in "practice," you should choose a method compatible with the Truth as well as your own capacities and level and then concentrate on it earnestly. Only then can you reap benefits swiftly. Otherwise, even if you spend many eons, you will not be able to escape Birth and Death.

This being so, there is no better method than to recite the Buddha's name with a mind of Faith an Vows, seeking rebirth in the Pure Land. If you wish to go deeper, you should carefully peruse the *Commentary on the Essential Points of the Amitabha Sutra* and other Pure Land sutras and treatises.

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Buddhism is an open method within the ten Dharma Realms – everyone *should* practice it and anyone *can* practice it. Because they do not fully understand its true nature, some Confucian scholars blindly criticize Buddhism ... However, the evil karma resulting from maligning the Dharma pales before the karma of vilifying it with one's own body! These days, some individuals, mouthing Mahayana teachings,

[3]Letter to the layman Teng Hsin-an. (Chinese ed. Vol. I, p. 44)

consider themselves awakened to the Way. They say: "I am [intrinsically] a Buddha, why recite the Buddha's name? Afflictions are Bodhi, what is the need to sever them? Lust, anger and delusion are precepts, concentration and wisdom, why sever lust, anger and delusion?"

Their words are as lofty as the heavenly clouds, but their actions, upon close examination, are as low as the underworld! Such persons may be considered the enemies of Buddhism. Their evil karma is ten thousand times worse than that of persons who malign Buddhism through mere ignorance of the Dharma. While their efforts in studying the Dharma are not entirely wasted, these can only constitute the seeds of liberation in the future. Their transgressions, on the other hand – the vilification of the Dharma with their bodies – will assuredly result in retribution along the Evil Paths for countless eons to come.

You should study Mahayana sutras and commentaries to ensure that your understanding is broad and complete. As far as cultivation is concerned, you should concentrate on Faith, Vows and recitation of the Buddha's name.

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Letter 4

The Jewelled Net of Indra[4]

From your letter, I can see that you are concentrating on reciting the Buddha's name, bowing to the *Lotus Sutra* and trying to reduce your transgressions, but you have not yet achieved success. You are thinking of following a special method to review your progress day by day. All these actions demonstrate that your cultivation in recent days is truly aimed at self-improvement, unlike those who attempt to deceive others with external displays to achieve renown. This being so, nothing could be better. I truly rejoice in your actions.

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A mind of sincerity and respect is the key to Pure Land cultivation. With utter sincerity and respect, even though you are only an ordinary being whose virtues are not yet perfected, you will achieve unimaginable results!

Conversely, without sincerity, bowing and reciting are no different from performing on stage, singing and prancing. Although you may be displaying the external signs of suffering, joy, compassion and other emotions, they are all make-believe because they do not spring from the depth of your mind. Any blessings or virtues that may result are but *deluded* merits of the human and celestial realms, and these are precisely the basis of evil karma and the seeds of immense suffering in the future. You should explain this to all your friends and colleagues, enjoining them to cultivate sincerely, so as to spread the benefits widely ...

You should not think that the merits and virtues of reciting the name of, or visualizing *one* Buddha are less encompassing than those received from reciting the name of, or visualizing *many* Buddhas. You should realize that Amitabha Buddha is the Dharma Realm Treasure Body. All the virtues of the Buddhas in the ten directions of the Dharma Realm are fully encompassed in Amitabha Buddha. This is like the jewelled net of Indra, whose thousands and thousands of jewels are fully reflected in one jewel, the image of one jewel is reflected in thousands and thousands of jewels, and each and every jewel encompasses every other, in perfect, unimpeded fashion.

[4] Letter to the layman Kao Shao-lin. (Chinese ed. Vol. I, p. 49)

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To great sages who have cultivated for a long time, widely varying conditions and environments do not matter; in fact, the more diverse they are, the more focussed the minds of these sages become. For beginners, on the other hand, if conditions and environments are varied, the mind-consciousness grows confused and unfocussed. Those with heavy obstructions and shallow wisdom may even, at times, be afflicted by demons. For this reason, Buddha Sakyamuni and the Patriarchs all enjoined us to recite the Buddha's name singlemindedly until achieving samadhi – at which time hundreds of thousands of Dharma methods and countless sublime meanings will manifest themselves in full. To exemplify this Truth, the ancients have said:

> To bathe in the great ocean is to use the waters of hundreds of rivers...

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Letter 5

The Ten Thousand Dharmas have no True Nature[5]

From your letter, I learned that in recent days you have engaged in earnest cultivation, examining yourself, mending your ways and following the path of the sages, with no desire for empty fame. I am very happy indeed!

To follow in the footsteps of the Buddhas and sages and escape Birth and Death, you should first develop an attitude of shame and repentance, abandon evil ways, perform wholesome deeds, keep the precepts and practice self-restraint. You should aim for the Truth and practice to your utmost ability. Otherwise there is deceit within deceit. Thus, understanding the Dharma is not difficult; practice is the real difficulty! Many intelligent persons merely verbalize but fail to practice. They therefore waste an entire lifetime, spoiling a visit to the jewelled mountain and returning empty-handed. What a great pity! Their deluded thoughts flare up unchecked because they are not earnest in maintaining correct thought. If they would only concentrate on one realm, deluded thoughts would be converted into "correct wisdom." Therefore, as the saying goes:

> If the king rules wisely, rebels and bandits will become like his own sons; if he rules unwisely, even his closest friends will turn into enemies.

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As common beings, who among us is not afflicted by delusion and evil karma? However, if you take precautions in your daily life, afflictions will not flare up whenever you meet with adverse circumstances. Even if they do arise, you will be aware of and eradicate them. The conditions leading to afflictions are numerous. Most powerful among them are *wealth, lust and unusual adversities.*

If you realize that ill-gotten gains are more dangerous than venemous snakes, you will not desire them when you see them. On the other hand, to assist fellow beings is precisely to lay the foundation for our own future merit and virtue. Knowing this, whenever those in need seek your help, you should not be stingy and refuse, developing afflictions in the process.

[5]Another letter to the layman Kao Shao-lin. (Chinese ed. Vol. I, p. 55)

As for lustful thoughts, when you come across women as beautiful as flowers or precious gems, even women of pleasure and courtesans, you should view them as your own sisters and, with a compassionate mind, seek to rescue them. In this way, you will not be moved by beautiful forms or swayed by lustful thoughts. Within the family, husbands and wives should respect one another as guests ...

When encountering adverse circumstances, you should develop thoughts of compassion, forgiving those who do not realize their mistakes and avoiding disputes. You should think: "in my previous lives, I have caused suffering and hurt sentient beings on many occasions. If I meet with adversity today, it is merely the repayment of previous debts." Thinking thus, you become naturally content and do not develop a mind of anger and vengefulness.

However, these methods are for those of low capacities. In the case of sages who have cultivated for a long time, all afflictions become the "illuminating Mind Store" – the ten thousand dharmas have always been without self, the adverse or beneficial consequences of all actions depend on the individual alone.

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Faith, Vows and Practice form the cornerstone of Pure Land. If these three conditions are fulfilled, rebirth in the Land of Ultimate Bliss will be achieved. You should pay particular attention to Faith and Vows, and wish wholeheartedly to achieve rebirth in the Pure Land ... [and not as a celestial being or a Dharma Master, however awakened, as these are still within the realm of Birth and Death]. Only then will your Faith and Vows reach Amitabha Buddha so that His Compassionate Vow may embrace you. In this connection, Elder Master Ou I has said:

> Achieving rebirth in the Pure Land depends entirely on Faith and Vows, while the level of rebirth depends on the depth of practice.

This is a truth as solid as steel – even if a thousand Buddhas were to appear on earth, it would not change. Only by firmly believing in this truth will you have a destiny in the Western Pure Land.

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If you experience difficulty in reaching one-pointedness of mind, you should focus your mind and recite with care. The main criteria of such concentration are utter sincerity and earnestness. It is very difficult to achieve one-pointedness of mind without utter sincerity. However, sincerity is not enough. You should next listen attentively to the recitation. Whether or not recitation is performed aloud, it should originate from the mind. It then proceeds from the mouth and enters the ears (even

if you recite silently, the marks of oral recitation still exist in the mind). With mind and mouth reciting clearly, the ears hearing clearly and the mind thus concentrated, deluded thoughts will cease by themselves.

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You have now reached your fifties. If you wish to attain liberation in this very life, you should concentrate on the Pure Land method. The *Diamond Sutra* and the *Lotus Sutra* should be temporarily set aside, until such time as you fully possess the Pure Land principles and achieve one-pointedness of mind through Buddha Recitation. If you spend time studying while you are trying to engage in cultivation, you may not have the time or energy. Thus, you will achieve neither and lose the benefits of both.

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Letter 6

Faith, Vows and Practice[6]

The true intention of Buddha Sakyamuni, when He appeared in the world to preach the Dharma and rescue sentient beings, was for all beings to escape Birth and Death and attain Enlightenment immediately. However, because sentient beings were all of differing capacities and thus could not entirely meet His transcendental expectations, the All-Compassionate Being resorted to one expedient teaching after another, all of them adapted to the individual capacities of sentient beings.

To those of the highest capacities, the Great Sage taught the path of the Buddhas, showing them the Self-Nature directly so that they might attain Buddhahood in one lifetime – as in the case of Sudhana in the *Avatamsaka Sutra* or the Dragon Princess in the *Lotus Sutra*. To those of more modest capacities, the Buddha taught the Bodhisattva, Pratyeka Buddha and Arhat paths, so that they might reach Buddhahood through step-by-step cultivation. To those of still lower capacities, the Buddha taught the Five Precepts and the Ten Virtues.

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These methods, high or low, some leading to swift liberation, others to gradual liberation, are all different. However, they all require self-power and deep cultivation to escape from the cycle of Birth and Death and reach the Self-Nature. If even a trace *delusion of views* or *delusion of thought* remains, the roots of Birth and Death cannot be extirpated. This being the case, even if the cultivator's powers of concentration and wisdom are profound, he will continue to revolve in the cycle of Birth and Death. Only at the level of the Arhats are the roots of Birth and Death completely severed.

However, transcending Birth and Death is merely the small fruit of the Arhats; the cultivator must still aim for the path of Great Bodhi, relying on his Vow to be reborn in the worlds of the ten directions. He may then cultivate the six paramitas and the ten thousand conducts, in order to achieve Buddhahood and rescue sentient beings ... [In this manner, he will gradually achieve the 52 different stages of Bodhisattvahood, up to the level of Wonderful Enlightenment, before finally reaching Buddhahood.]

[6]Letter to the layman Ch'en Hsi-chou. (Chinese ed. Vol. I, p. 59)

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Although Buddha Sakyamuni expounded countless methods throughout His teaching career, they are all based upon the various stages of Bodhisattvahood mentioned above.

Thus, the Zen tradition points directly to the Self-Mind, seeing one's Nature and achieving Buddhahood. This is a perfect, direct shortcut. However, we are speaking here from the viewpoint of the inherent Dharma Body (that is, principle or noumenon), bypassing phenomenal cultivation and attainment grounded in the law of Cause and Effect. If we were to consider the different levels of cultivation and achievement, there would be no difference between Zen and the Sutra Studies method.

However, in the midst of this Dharma-Ending Age, there are very few good spiritual advisors, while the capacities of sentient beings are limited. It is difficult enough to find someone who is *awakened to the Way*, not to mention one who has truly *attained Enlightenment*! Thus, knowing that sentient beings would find it extremely difficult to achieve liberation by relying on *self-power* alone, Sakyamuni Buddha taught, in addition to other methods, the special approach of Pure Land. With this method, as long as their Faith and Vows are true and earnest, even those who have committed the Five Grave Offenses or the Ten Evil Acts, may, on the verge of death, when the marks of the hells appear, follow the advice of a good spiritual advisor and recite the Buddha's name one to ten times. Then, thanks to the compassionate power of Amitabha Buddha, even they will be received and guided to the Pure Land – not to mention those who practice wholesome deeds and do not commit transgressions!

The more diligently the cultivator engages in wholesome conduct and the deeper his power of concentration, the higher his level of rebirth will be. He will see Amitabha Buddha soon after rebirth and be able to hear the wonderful Dharma. Therefore, even those who have awakened to the Way, severed delusion and attained the Truth should dedicate all merits toward rebirth in the Pure Land, seeking perfect attainment of the Dharma Body and swift attainment of Buddhahood.

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Other methods depend on the capacities of the practitioner. If they lead only to limited attainment [such as Arhatship], those of high capacities need not practice them. If they lead to great attainment, those of limited capacities cannot cultivate them. Only the Pure Land method embraces practitioners of all three capacities, high, moderate and low. Supremely lofty beings, such as the Bodhisattvas Avalokitesvara, Mahasthamaprapta, Manjusri and Samantabhadra, cannot transcend

it, while those of low capacities, who have committed the Five Grave Offenses or the Ten Evil Deeds and have sown the seeds of the Never-Ending Hell, can still participate in it. If Sakyamuni Buddha had not taught this method, the majority of sentient beings in the Dharma-Ending Age could not hope to escape the cycle of Birth and Death.

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Despite its loftiness, the Pure Land Dharma Door is a very easy method of cultivation. For this reason, not only do ordinary beings find it difficult to believe, but cultivators of the Two Vehicles (Theravada followers) also harbor doubts. This applies even to Bodhisattvas at the "expedient level." Only those who have sown the wholesome seeds of Pure Land in previous lives as well as the higher level Bodhisattvas can truly have firm and deep Faith in it.

A newborn prince, who has not yet proven his talents and virtues, is still above the ministers in nobility and honor, thanks to the power of his royal lineage. Likewise, those who practice Buddha Recitation with full Faith and Vows, though they may be ordinary beings, belong to a lineage superior to that of the disciples of the Two Vehicles. This is because they have learned to cast their earthly minds into the sea of Enlightenment – silently in tune with the wonderful Way. Thanks to Amitabha Buddha's power, they will swiftly attain the level of non-retrogression.

In discussing the Pure Land method, you should make a general comparison of the ease and difficulty of *other-power* vs. *self-power*, as employed in this and other methods, respectively. Otherwise, even if you do not doubt the Dharma, you will doubt yourself, and even a trace of doubt becomes an obstacle. In such a case, even if you engage in cultivation you will not reap the full benefit – not to mention what will happen if you do not cultivate. For this reason, Faith is the first criterion. You should firmly believe that the Saha World is a place of suffering, the Western Pure Land a realm of bliss ... As is said in the *Smaller Amitabha Sutra*:

> Shariputra: Why is that land called Utmost Happiness? The beings of that land experience no suffering; they only know every kind of joy; therefore it is called Utmost Happiness. (Hozen Seki, *Amida-kyo*, p. 18.)

You should be wary and not attempt to reason with the mind of an ordinary being, lest you mistakenly think that "all the wonderful, extraordinary events beyond common understanding that occur in the Western Pure Land are myths representing the Mind Dharma, rather than a true environment." With this misunderstanding, you lose the benefit of rebirth in the Pure Land. This is a major error, so be careful!

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Once you realize that the Saha World is a place of suffering while the Pure Land is a place of joy, you should develop true, earnest Vows, resolving to leave the Saha World and return to the Land of Ultimate Bliss. Such Vows are no different from those of a person who has fallen into an excrement pit and seeks to escape swiftly, or of a prisoner who yearns for his native village. Such hopes and desires should be utterly sincere, because your own strength cannot free you from your predicament.

Sentient beings in the Saha World, facing circumstances that accord or fail to accord with their wishes, often develop the mind of greed, anger and delusion, create the karma of killing, stealing and lust, and tarnish their bright, spotless Self-Nature – this is a filthy bottomless pit. Having created evil karma, they must endure suffering through many lifetimes along the Evil Paths – this is a drawn out imprisonment.

Untold eons ago, Amitabha Buddha made forty-eight Vows to rescue sentient beings. One of the Vows [the eighteenth] stated:

> If, after my obtaining Buddhahood, all beings in the ten quarters should desire in sincerity and trustfulness to be born in my country, and if they should not be born by only thinking of me ten times ..., may I not attain the highest Enlightenment. (J. Okazaki, *Pure Land Buddhist Painting*, p. 15.)

Although Amitabha Buddha, the Compassionate One, made such a Vow, if sentient beings do not seek His help, there is little He can do. However, anyone who recites his name with utter sincerity, vowing to leave the Saha World behind, will be welcomed and escorted to the Pure Land. Amitabha Buddha has great power; He can rescue sentient beings from the excrement pit and the prison of the defiled world, guide them to the Land of Ultimate Bliss, and help them enter the realms of the Buddhas to assume the prerogatives and functions of the Tathagatas (Buddhas).

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Rebirth in the Western Land thus requires, first of all, deep Faith and fervent Vows. Without these conditions, even if you were to cultivate, you could not obtain a response from Amitabha Buddha. You would merely reap the blessings of the human and celestial realms and sow the seeds of liberation in the future. Anyone who fulfills the conditions of Faith and Vows is assured of rebirth in the Pure Land. When Elder Master Yung Ming stated that "out of ten thousand who cultivate Pure Land, ten thousand will achieve rebirth," he was referring to those with full Faith and Vows. Once you have deep Faith and earnest Vows, you should practice Buddha Recitation as your principal method, guided by your Faith and Vows. These three components [Faith, Vows, Practice] are precisely the main tenets of Pure Land – lack of any one of these conditions will prevent you from achieving rebirth in the Land of Ultimate Bliss.

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The form of Buddha Recitation Practice depends on the circumstances of each individual – there is no single set way ... If the cultivator is very busy, having no free time, he should set aside a specific period in the early morning. After washing up, he should bow three times to the Buddha in front of his altar (if he has one). Then, standing erect, he should join his palms and singlemindedly recite the words "Na Mo Amitabha Buddha" as many times as he can in one stretch, each stretch counting as one recitation. He should recite thus for ten stretches, and then utter the following stanza:

> I vow that, along with other Pure Land cultivators,
> I will be reborn in the Land of Ultimate Bliss,
> See Amitabha Buddha, escape Birth and Death,
> And rescue all, as the Buddha does.

After reciting this stanza, he should bow three times before retiring.

If he does not have an altar, he can face west with palms joined, reciting according to the above method. This is the Ten Recitations Method which Elder Master Tzu Wen established for rulers and officials who are too busy with affairs of state to engage in cultivation. Why recite in one stretch? It is because sentient beings have scattered, unsettled minds and are thus unable to practice assiduously. This recitation method relies on the breath to concentrate the mind. However, the number of utterances is dependent on the length of the breath span. There should be no effort or constraint, as this would lead to fatigue ... Since recitation with a scattered mind cannot easily lead to rebirth in the Pure Land, this method is useful for focussing the mind. While the recitations are few in number, the virtues accrued are profound and rebirth is assured.

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Moreover, the practitioner should maintain a virtuous and forgiving mind in all circumstances, guard against mistakes in each of his thoughts, be willing to recognize mistakes, correct his transgressions and gladly perform good actions – only then will he be in accord with Buddha Amitabha. Failure to do so indicates that his mind is still obstructed and thus not consonant with the mind of the Buddha. This makes it difficult for the two to interact. Furthermore, when bowing, reciting Mahayana sutras or accomplishing various wholesome deeds, he should dedicate all the resulting merits to rebirth in the Pure Land. He should not dedicate only the merits of Buddha Recitation itself, while transferring incidental merits toward worldly blessings. In the latter case he would not be singleminded, making rebirth in the Pure Land very difficult to achieve.

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The Pure Land method is extolled in numerous Mahayana sutras. Theravada sutras, on the other hand, do not mention it at all. Those who are not versed in the Dharma and reject Buddha Recitation as a "self-benefit" method are speaking thoughtlessly. Do not listen to them.

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Letter 7

The Brahma Net Sutra and the Precepts[7]

I have made my home on P'u T'o Mountain for some twenty years now, and during the entire time have not engaged in personal contact with lay people. Recently, when Master Fu Yen visited our mountain, he approached me in the meditation hut on several occasions within the space of ten days to talk about your fidelity and moral integrity, exhibiting deep concern each time. On these occasions, I advanced the opinion that although your integrity is praiseworthy, you do not know how to cultivate properly.

I also said that, time permitting, I would write a letter of advice to you explaining the main lines of the Pure Land method, so that you could, according to your strength and conditions, step onto the Pure Land path. Upon hearing this, Master Yu Fen expressed his approval and wholeheartedly requested me to do so. This is the genesis of my letter to you today.

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The Dharma already exists in full in the minds of all sentient beings – both clergy and lay persons can uphold it. However, women's lives entail many restrictions. If you leave your native village to travel afar, you may well be subjected to oppression and assault. Therefore, you had better stay home, keep the precepts and recite the Buddha's name, determined to seek rebirth in the Western Pure Land. There is no need to leave your native place to become a nun. Extensive travel to various temples and other holy places to seek out great masters with whom to study the sutras in depth should be left to men. For women to follow this course is not advisable. You should strive to practice the Pure Land method, reciting the Buddha's name assiduously. If you succeed in gathering your six faculties together and engage in pure recitation without interruption, you can attain samadhi as a matter of course, in this very life. Why, then, worry about not reaching the higher lotus grades at the time of death?

Even if you do not reach samadhi, you will still achieve rebirth [in a lower lotus grade], be part of the Ocean-Wide Assembly, close to Amitabha Buddha. You will

[7] Letter to the laywoman Hsu Fu-hsien. (Chinese ed. Vol. I, p. 115)

gradually return to the True Self-Nature and naturally understand the various teachings. Then, just like an image in a mirror, you will appear in the Saha World without leaving the Pure Land, to rescue sentient beings throughout countless expedients, helping them all to reach the Pure Land and attain the Tolerance of Non-Birth (insight into the non-origination of all things). This will not be turning your back on your present firm determination to cultivate. In fact, you will deserve to be called a green lotus blossom, born amid fire, a true woman of character!

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The basis of Pure Land is the determination to be reborn in the Land of Ultimate Bliss. Therefore, the motto of the school is "Faith, Vows and Practice." "Faith" means believing that the Saha World is filled with the Eight Sufferings, while the Pure Land is a realm of boundless joy!

Once you have firm Faith, you should vow to leave the Saha World, like a prisoner desperate to leave his jail, and resolve to achieve rebirth in the Pure Land, like a traveller longing for his native place.

As someone who has not achieved rebirth in the Pure Land, even if you were presented with the jewelled throne of the god-king Brahma, you should consider it as a cause and condition of perdition, without a single thought of longing. Likewise, wishes such as "rebirth as a male, entering the clergy early in life, attaining great intelligence, great spiritual powers ..." should all be considered tortuous paths of cultivation which can only bring you back to your starting point. Abandon all these thoughts and seek only to achieve rebirth in the Pure Land at the time of death. Once reborn, you will naturally escape the cycle of Birth and Death, transcend the human world, enter the realm of the sages, reach the stage of non-retrogression and attain the stage of Non-Birth. At that time, when you look back, you will discover that the royal throne in the human and celestial realms, even rebirth as a high-ranking monk, are but tiresome occurrences that last for many eons with no liberation in sight. You will then realize that compared to your present lotus grade, those aspirations are no different from a flickering flame versus a rainbow, or an anthill versus a mountain!

Thus, the Pure Land practitioner certainly should not seek the blessings and merits of the celestial and human realms, not even rebirth as a high-ranking monk. Just a trace of such thinking constitutes a lack of deep Faith and earnest Vows. Such thoughts place a barrier between you and the Vows of Amitabha Buddha – preventing you from achieving rebirth in the Pure Land. This is a great pity, a great waste, indeed! How could you have the heart to exchange the unimaginably sublime Pure Land for mundane happiness – so that when all the blessings have been exhausted, you would continue to revolve in the cycle of Birth and Death, dragged by the current of karmic delusion, subject to untold suffering?

If poison is mixed with butter, the delicious butter becomes lethal. Practicing Pure Land without the right frame of mind brings similar harm. You must extirpate such wrong thoughts in order to enjoy fully the benefits of the Pure Land method.

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Once having developed deep Faith and earnest Vows, you should hold fast to the words "Amitabha Buddha." Regardless of the occasion, whether walking or standing, sitting or reclining, speaking or remaining silent, moving about, meditating, dressing, eating, even when in the privy, you should keep the words "Amitabha Buddha" firmly in mind. You should exert yourself until the recitations are constantly before you, the *whole Buddha* is Mind, Mind and Buddha are *one* – reciting to the ultimate point where all mundane feelings are forgotten. At that time, the mind being empty, the Buddha appears. During this life you can attain the Buddha Remembrance Samadhi and at the time of death achieve rebirth in the upper lotus grades.

Cultivation in this way may be considered as exercising your abilities to the utmost. In daily life, the merits accrued from the smallest wholesome deeds, as well as the virtues garnered from Buddha Recitation and Sutra Recital, should all be dedicated to rebirth in the Pure Land. All actions then become practices which facilitate rebirth – not unlike deriving soil from dust and sand or the oceans from the rivers and streams. The depth and breadth of such Buddha Recitation is immense.

You should, furthermore, develop the Bodhi Mind, vow to rescue sentient beings and dedicate the merits and virtues of cultivation to repayment of the four great debts in the Triple Realm, as well as to sentient beings in the Dharma Realm. This creates a far-reaching Dharma affinity with all sentient beings, like oil poured on fire or rain falling on new seedlings, so that you will achieve early success in your Mahayana practice. If you miss this point, your Pure Land practice will become the grasping, self-benefit approach common to humans and lower level sages [Arhats and Pratyeka Buddhas]. While your method of cultivation may be sublime, the benefits received will be extremely low level and limited.

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When reciting the Buddha's name, you should gather your thoughts together. Recitation originates in the mind and is channelled through the mouth, each phrase, each word, clearly enunciated. You should also listen clearly, impressing the words in your mind. If the faculty of hearing is under control, the other faculties are also held in check and cannot chase after external dusts. As a result, one-pointedness

of mind is swiftly achieved. Thus, the Bodhisattva Mahasthamaprapta said in the *Surangama Sutra*:

> To gather the six senses together, pure recitation following upon pure recitation without interruption, thus attaining samadhi – this is uppermost.

Likewise, the Bodhisattva Manjusri taught:

> "Hearing" within, hearing one's Nature – one's Nature becomes the Supreme Path.

You certainly should not think that oral recitation [Holding the Name] is shallow, and follow other methods, such as Visualization, Contemplation of an Image or Real Mark Buddha Recitation. Of the four Buddha Recitation methods, only oral recitation is well-adapted to the capacities of sentient beings. If one-pointedness of mind is maintained, the sublime Truth of Real Mark will be fully revealed and the extraordinary realm of the Western Pure Land will appear clearly.

Therefore, you can achieve Real Mark through oral recitation; you can see the Western Pure Land without engaging in visualization. This method of recitation is precisely the wonderful door to the Way, the most expedient path to Buddhahood.

People today generally do not understand the teachings underlying the Visualization or Real Mark methods. If they follow these methods, they may at times be subject to demons. Thus, the best approach is to select the easiest practice which still leads to the wonderful fruit of Enlightenment. You should not attempt a shortcut and end up losing the Way, seeking liberation but winding up in perdition. That would be regrettable indeed!

[After summarizing several Pure Land commentaries to reinforce these points, the Master continued.]

Once you have read these books, you will have a complete understanding of the tenets of Pure Land. It does not matter that you have not read the sutras widely. Without fully understanding Pure Land teachings, even if you deeply understand the entire Buddhist canon and have awakened completely to Self-Mind, it will take you untold eons to fulfill your original Vow to escape the cycle of Birth and Death. Buddha Recitation is the panacea for all diseases. To miss knowing about such a wonderful remedy would be a cause for great suffering and regret! To be aware of but not practice it, or to practice it but not in earnest, is to have even greater cause for suffering and regret!

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As far as receiving the lay precepts is concerned, you can visit this temple if you have the means and the capacity to do so. Otherwise, why get so fixated on

travel? All you need is to have an earnest, sincere mind, repent your transgressions before your home altar for seven consecutive days and express the wish to receive the precepts by yourself. On the seventh day, you should kneel before a Buddha image and say aloud:

> "Your disciple, by the name of – –, vows to receive the five precepts and fulfill the obligations of a laywoman. I vow that for the rest of my life, I will not take the lives of sentient beings, steal, indulge in sexual misconduct, lie or take intoxicants."

Repeating these vows three times constitutes receiving the precepts. The most important thing is to do so in an utterly sincere frame of mind – in which case, the benefits and virtues of receiving the precepts are the same whether you do so by yourself or through a monk or nun.

You should not think that receiving the precepts in such a manner is not in accord with the Dharma. You should know that the method described above follows the wise teaching of Sakyamuni Buddha in the *Brahma Net Sutra*.

On P'u T'o Mountain, there are no precept transmission ceremonies in the autumn, but only during a seven-week period following the lunar New Year. However, I sincerely wish that you would stay put at home practicing Buddha Recitation, rather than struggling through fog and snow to reach P'u T'o Mountain.

If you stick to your fixed ideas without changing your mind, you will miss distinguishing the good from the bad, damaging your own pure cultivation and displaying ingratitude toward the sincere, earnest words of this old monk. I want you to attain the goal of your cultivation within this lifetime and certainly do not have the least intention of hindering your development in the Dharma. If you think it over carefully, you will see so yourself.

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As for your intention to commit suicide because you cannot become a nun, such determination, however powerful and intense, is deluded and insane. In the midst of this Dharma-Ending Age, how many monks and nuns are worthy of being teachers? ... As a woman, especially, you may be subjected to overbearing masters, insulted or drawn into intrigues.

You only think that to "leave home" and become a nun is liberation, but you do not yet know the many difficulties and obstacles which monks and nuns face.

Do not think, furthermore, that to commit suicide is to free yourself of the cares and worries of this life! Once dead, your soul will be led away by the power of karma to be reborn in another body – not to mention that, given your angry state

of mind, you may well be reborn in the animal realm. Under such circumstances, it will be difficult even to regain a female body. Should you succeed in being reborn as a woman or a man, or even as a ruler in the human or celestial realms, there is still no assurance that you will encounter the Dharma and engage in cultivation! Even if you are so fortunate, who knows if you will be in the good position to discover the Pure Land method – a method that enables each and every one to escape Birth and Death in one lifetime.

Moreover, even if you were fortunate enough to encounter the Pure Land method then, is it not much better to go on living and cultivating patiently right now, so that when this retribution body comes to an end, you will immediately achieve rebirth in the Land of Ultimate Bliss?

I have exhausted my words in advising and counselling you. Let me ask you: did anyone ever go over these questions with yourself in mind to the extent that I have? If you do not follow the words of this old monk, you have shown ingratitude toward his teaching; moreover, I fear your suffering in the future will be infinitely greater than it is now!

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Letter 8

Let Us Part Ways[8]

(Original Letter to Elder Master Yin Kuang)

It took some ten years of Buddha Recitation for me to know something of its wonderful meaning. I venture to think that the Pure Land method, as taught in such writings as your Pure Land letters, is, in general, an expedient for ordinary people of limited capacities. However, if people like ourselves, who are fully literate and accustomed to exercising our minds, follow this method, we certainly cannot be reborn in the Pure Land! According to my limited understanding, those who recite the Buddha's name seeking rebirth in the Pure Land should first understand "who is reciting the Buddha's name," because only when we discover the real Master will Buddha Recitation have meaning and rebirth be assured. This does not apply only to Buddha Recitation. Anyone who recites sutras or recites mantras should also follow this path.

Nowadays, those who teach Buddha Recitation say that we should recite in a mature way with an utterly focussed, "as if dead" mind in order to achieve rebirth in the Pure Land. Do they not realize that if we are not clear as to "who is reciting the Buddha's name," we cannot recite in a mature way with an "as if dead" mind? Even if we were to recite one hundred thousand times each day, such recitation would have no relationship to the issue of Birth and Death.

Some people even add that "ancient Masters generally concentrate on oral recitation rather than meditation on the Buddha's name." I, on the contrary, would say: " the ancients practiced oral recitation only after they had achieved success in meditation – those of limited capacities should not try to emulate them." It is really too bad that, these days, nine out of ten practitioners fail to understand this point. I always do my utmost to caution people about this, but some laymen even think that I have wrong views. Understanding the subtle meaning of the Dharma has sunk to such depths that we can only lament and deplore the situation!

I am baring my heart to you today, and would beg you, Master, to certify my understanding and expand on this truth. This is for the benefit of everyone, and certainly not this writer alone.

[8] Letter to the layman Wang Yu-mu. (Chinese ed. Vol. I, p. 196))

Answer:

I cannot exhaust my praise nor commend you and your friends enough for the thoughts behind your letter! You have very good intentions, wishing everyone to see his Original Nature so as to achieve rebirth in the upper lotus grades. The *Meditation Sutra* teaches:

> Recite the Mahayana sutras, understand the Supreme Meaning, develop the Bodhi Mind, counsel and exhort others to cultivate.

This must certainly be your intention.

Nevertheless, the Dharma should be adapted to the level of the listener. If through failure to examine his level, you administer the wrong remedy, you will be no different from an incompetent physician who kills his patients with the wrong medicine. You should know that although the two Dharma methods, Pure Land and Zen, have the same root and the same source, their methods of cultivation are different.

The main tenet of Zen is to see one's Original Nature, while the teachings of Pure Land are Faith, Vows and Reciting the Buddha's name to achieve rebirth in the Pure Land. *If most people today were of high capacities, your words would indeed be extremely beneficial.* However, on close examination, those of high capacities are few and far between, while those of moderate and low capacities form the vast majority. This being the case, failing to teach people to develop Faith and Vows seeking rebirth in the Pure Land, while advising them to meditate on the Buddha's name [as a koan] is utterly detrimental.

This is because, while awakening to the Way through meditation on the Buddha's name would be a fortunate development, an utterly sincere Vow for rebirth in the Pure Land would still be necessary.

Meanwhile, if meditation is unsuccessful and the mind constantly grasps at the koan "who is reciting the Buddha's name," correspondence between the practitioner and the Buddha will be extremely difficult to realize and the benefit of the "welcoming and escorting" Vow will be lost.

Those who really know "who is reciting the Buddha's name" are precisely those who have already awakened and clearly seen their True Nature. Nowadays, how many practitioners can meditate to the point of awakening to the Way (Great Awakening)?

However, let us not speak about others. Even you and your friends have not reached that level. How do I know? It is because if you had, you would never have dared to make such statements as these in your letter: "the Pure Land method is an expedient for ordinary people of limited capacities ...; not knowing who is reciting the Buddha's name is not reciting in a mature way with an as-if-dead mind ...; reciting a hundred thousand times a day has no relationship to the issue of Birth

and Death ...; the ancients practiced oral recitation only after they had achieved success in meditation – those of limited capacities should not try to emulate them ..."

In truth, while your intention is to benefit yourself and others equally, through your words you have not only erred yourself, you have led others astray as well. From now on, please desist from such talk. Otherwise, you will slam the door on and bury the all-embracing method of the Buddhas to rescue sentient beings everywhere – preventing this method from being known far and wide. Such a transgression is tantamount to vilifying the Buddhas, the Dharma and the Sangha. You should be careful indeed!

Since your understanding of the Dharma is not skillfully adapted to people's capacities, in that you attempt to bring a high-level Dharma to everyone, it is, in the end, a one-sided (biased) attachment – and a great mistake! Not realizing this, you think that you have correctly understood the subtle meaning of the Dharma and therefore seek my certification. This monk, although lowly and not erudite, would not dare to commend, acquiesce in and support such a request, which would cause all of us to fall into the error of vilifying the Three Treasures!

If you do not believe the words of this old monk, let us part ways once and for all. I would not dare try forcing others to abandon their own ideas and understanding to follow my lowly thoughts. It is only because of your letter that I have reluctantly offered some frank though limited views.

I hope that you will reflect deeply on this letter.

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Letter 9

Amitabha Buddha – the Boundless Self-Nature of Light and Life[9]

Since we parted in mid-spring, time has flown by, and it is now summer. The light of springtime has passed swiftly – a frightening reminder indeed!

Each time I think of the two of you, I recall that despite your true and sincere faith, you lack sufficient understanding of the Dharma, to the point where you have abandoned the lofty ground to follow lowly, dark paths. Not only have you lost correct views and become yourselves a topic of ridicule, even this old monk is embarrassed by the bad reputation he has acquired for being an acquaintance of yours!

In your letter, you mentioned the possibility of having me correct some of your future writings. However, with my weak eyes and bad health, I do not normally take to writing. Even if my advice is needed, whatever I put down is nothing but a heap of empty words. What is there which is worth reading? Still, lest I seem ungrateful for your trust, I am tentatively setting forth some leftover soup and stale rice. If you do not object to the smell, perhaps they can temporarily assuage your hunger until the time when you can taste the exquisite food of the Self-Nature.

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The verse "Four Options" is very profound and worthy of attention. You should ponder it carefully. By all means do not take it lightly on the basis of the shallow explanations of a few persons, or you will fail to appreciate the great compassionate mind of Master Yung Ming, who has exhausted words and counsel. The treatise *The Benefits of Reciting the Sutras Depend on One's Mind* was written because people today recite the sutras without the least bit of reverence. The true benefit of the Buddha Dharma is found in a reverent mind. Such a state of mind can even lead to swift Supreme Enlightenment – not to mention the lower levels of sagehood (Arhats and Pratyeka Buddhas)!

[9]Letter to two brothers in Yungchia. (Chinese ed. Vol. I, p. 85)

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The Pure Land Patriarch Shan Tao, traditionally considered a Transformation Body of Amitabha Buddha, was endowed with great spiritual powers and wisdom. However, in teaching Pure Land, he did not advocate the mystical and sublime but merely emphasized everyday, ordinary realities. His teachings on Exclusive Practice and Sundry Practices are extremely useful.

Exclusive Practice consists of the body bowing exclusively to Amitabha Buddha, the mouth exclusively repeating the Buddha's name, and the mind focussing exclusively on the Buddha's name. Out of ten thousand cultivators who practice in such a manner, ten thousand are assured of rebirth in the Pure Land.

Sundry Practices entail engaging in various methods of cultivation while dedicating the merits accrued toward rebirth in the Western Land. Since the practitioner's mind is not focussed or singleminded, it is difficult to accumulate merits. Thus, only three or four out of hundreds of thousands can hope to achieve rebirth in the Pure Land. These are true, golden words of advice, immutable throughout the ages. Both of you should follow them for your own benefit and in counselling everyone else.

Reciting mantras, too, should be considered an ancillary practice, rather than a principal method along with Buddha Recitation. The merits derived from mantra recitation are indeed inconceivable. However, ordinary people who achieve rebirth in the Pure Land owe it entirely to utterly sincere Faith and Vows, as these correspond to the lofty Vows of Amitabha Buddha. If you are not clear about this truth, thinking that all Dharmas are unfathomable and therefore it does not matter which method you cultivate, you will end up practicing neither Zen nor Pure Land. This will lead to eons of wandering in the wasteland of Birth and Death – whom, then, could you rely on for help?

You should realize that as a common being full of karmic obstructions, you will certainly find it difficult to escape Birth and Death in this very life unless you rely on the Vows of Amitabha Buddha. Only then will you discover that the Pure Land method surpasses other Dharma methods in power and utility!

Reciting mantras and sutras for the purpose of sowing merits and wisdom and eliminating evil karma and transgressions is all to the good. However, to be deluded and seek spiritual powers is to abandon the roots for the branches – an error in judgement. If, furthermore, your mind is grasping, your understanding of the Dharma nebulous, your precept-keeping lax, your Bodhi Mind undeveloped and your discriminatory, win-lose mind raging unchecked, you will be exposed one day to demons that may drive you insane!

If you want to obtain spiritual powers, you should first attain Enlightenment and Buddhahood. Once Buddhahood is attained, you will naturally have full spiritual

powers. If you do not strive for the Way but merely seek spiritual powers, let us not even speak about whether anything can be gained. If you should obtain anything, it would become an impediment to the Way. For this reason, the Buddhas and Patriarchs have strictly prohibited this erroneous form of cultivation. Because such ideas are common, I have taken the opportunity to mention them in passing.

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Both of you still have your parents at home. Therefore, you should keep explaining the Pure Land method and the accounts of rebirth to them, so that they may develop the mind of joy, believe in the accounts and follow the examples therein. If you do not repay your filial debts in this way, even if you are filial in the mundane sense, what good will it do your parents at the end of their lives? ... You should wake up and hasten to ensure that, at death, your parents will participate in the Lotus Assembly. They will then be close to Amitabha Buddha and achieve the boundless Self-Nature of *light and life.*

The sufferings of the Saha World are endless. Even in time of peace, sentient beings are jostling one another in an atmosphere of sorrow and affliction. However, because they have endured it for so long, they have grown accustomed to it and are no longer aware of it. In China recently, insurrection and strife have become daily events; the sufferings of the people are beyond description! Abroad, a great war has been raging for three years. With casualties already legion, the world conflict goes on with no end in sight. This tragic situation is caused by the karma of sentient beings and is the precursor of an extended period of disturbances to come. It is truly frightening to think of the sufferings of the future!

I hope that both of you will develop the Bodhi Mind and seek rebirth in the Pure Land, to achieve the fruits of Buddhahood swiftly before returning to the Saha World to rescue sentient beings. The sutras teach:

> Bodhisattvas fear causes, sentient beings fear effects and results.

Bodhisattvas, being wary of evil results, eliminate evil causes. Sentient beings all too often vie to create evil causes and then have to endure evil results. When enduring suffering, they do not know enough to practice repentance, but create more evil karma in the hope of escaping retribution. Thus, injustice and retribution follow upon one another continuously, without end. It is so pitiful and frightening to think about it!

Knowing this truth, those who do not seek rebirth in the Pure Land are not yet truly among the wise!

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Letter 10

The Pure Mind is Bodhi[10]

From your letter, I see that you are diligently fighting bad habits but have not yet obtained results. This is because you are not truly concerned about the issue of Birth and Death, nor have you internalized the method that helps people to "transcend the human realm for that of the saints," sever delusive karma and achieve pure thoughts. That is why you have failed to achieve true results.

You should always ponder this truth: "It is difficult to be reborn as a human being, it is difficult to learn of the Buddha Dharma, it is difficult to encounter the Pure Land method. I am fortunate today to have been reborn as a human being and am in the favorable position of having learned about the Pure Land method. How dare I waste this limited lifespan on evanescent form, fragrance, fame and fortune? How can I resign myself to an empty life and useless death, wallowing along the Six Paths – with no end in sight?"

You should paste the word "death" on your forehead, so that when you meet with various circumstances unworthy of attachment, you will immediately recognize them as boiling cauldrons and firepits that can only harm you. In this way, you will not be like a moth, freely choosing to fly into the flame and burning to death.

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You should realize that worthwhile activities are a boat of compassion to rescue you from suffering. Thus, you will no longer shy away from opportunities for charity and justice nor be dilatory on the path of cultivation. In this manner, mundane circumstances can also become conditions for entering the Way, as cultivation is not synonymous with abandoning all worldly activities. If the mind is firm and not swayed by circumstances, "mundane concerns are precisely liberation." Therefore, the *Diamond Sutra* always teaches "non-attachment to form." Although true cultivators develop the aspiration to rescue all sentient beings, they do not see themselves as the rescuers or sentient beings as the rescued. Even when Supreme Enlightenment is attained, there is no mark of who has attained the fruits of Ultimate Nirvana. This is true cultivation of the Bodhisattva path.

[10]Letter to a layman in Ningpo. (Chinese ed. Vol. II, p. 244)

On the other hand, even rescuing sentient beings or cultivating the ten thousand virtues cannot be in accord with the True Mark Supreme Vehicle unless practitioners realize that sentient beings are, *in their nature and essence*, Buddhas. Amid Equal Nature, sentient beings erroneously develop the mind of discrimination, turning "unconditioned" benefits or merits into "conditioned" merits. How, then, can they escape the binding cycle of form, fame and fortune?

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Living in this world, people all have obligations. However, you should not take on unnecessary activities beyond your normal duties. Instead, use your free time, according to your capacities and circumstances, to recite sutras and the Buddha's name, determined to achieve rebirth in the Pure Land. You can generate merits and virtues by contributing financially to worthwhile activities or by praising those who engage in them. You can also accrue merits by developing a mind of joy and contentment at their accomplishment by others.

All such merits and virtues should be dedicated as additional aids to rebirth in the Pure Land. It is like a boat which not only sails with the wind but also has oarsmen to speed it on its way. How can it fail to return swiftly to the shore?

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The last day of the twelfth month is the end of the year. If by that day you have not made advance preparations, how can you avoid your creditors? The time of death is precisely the last day of the twelfth month of a life; if you are not ready with the personal provisions of Faith, Vows and Practice, and are still filled with the evil karma of greed, anger and delusion, those whom you have wronged, your creditors from time immemorial, will come pushing and shoving one another for repayment. Those who are unaware of the Pure Land method can do nothing but follow their evil karma, while even Pure Land practitioners who do not cultivate truly and earnestly sink into evil realms, mired in the cycle of Birth and Death for eons and eons.

The key to escaping suffering is to develop, in each and every thought, a fear of death and of perdition along the Evil Paths after death. Buddha Recitation then naturally grows more earnest, rebirth in the Pure Land is assured and no worldly dusts can "plunder" correct thought.

The *Heart Sutra* states:

> The Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara clearly perceived that the five skandas (encompassing body and mind) are all empty and thus overcame all suffering.

The five skandas encompass body and mind as well as the external environment. If we truly realize that they are empty, we are already free of them – even while remaining part of them. What, then, is not the Great Liberation method, the realm of Great Nirvana?

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Letter 11

Awakening is Still within the Realm of Birth and Death[11]

To receive true benefits in this very life, the practitioner should follow the Pure Land method, reciting the Buddha's name with Faith and Vows, seeking rebirth in the Land of Ultimate Bliss. Escape from the wasteland of Birth and Death will then be assured. Otherwise, not only will those who have not received the true transmission of the Dharma fail to achieve liberation, even those who have received it will have no hope of achieving liberation! This is because to receive the transmission of the Dharma is to *awaken to the Way* but not to *attain Enlightenment.* Only by attaining Enlightenment [at the Arhat level or above] will you escape the cycle of Birth and Death. Awakening to the Way is still within that cycle.

Cultivating other methods requires severance of karmic obstructions and attainment of the Truth before you can escape Birth and Death. With the Pure Land method, you need only recite the Buddha's name with deep Faith and earnest Vows, while ceasing transgressions and performing good deeds – thus engaging simultaneously in the main and subsidiary practices – in order to be assured of rebirth in the Western Land. In fact, the highest level of rebirth will be achieved.

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Not only are those who have perfected Pure Land practice assured of rebirth, even those guilty of the Five Grave Offenses and the Ten Evil Acts can also achieve it (as long as, on the verge of death, they awaken, become utterly ashamed of their transgressions, grow frightened and recite the Buddha's name in utmost sincerity). This is because Amitabha Buddha has great, all-embracing compassion and considers it His calling to rescue sentient beings. Anyone who sincerely seeks His assistance will be gathered in and rescued. This is called "taking one's karma along to the Pure Land, through the power of Amitabha Buddha."

[11] Letter to the layman Yueh Hsien-ch'iao. (Chinese ed. Vol. II, p. 247)

In this Dharma-Ending Age, if you cultivate other methods, abandoning the Dharma Door of Pure Land, you can only reap merits and blessings in the celestial and human realms or sow the causes and conditions of liberation in future eons. This is because few in this day and age truly have the strength to sever all karmic obstructions. Therefore the roots of Birth and Death continue to exist. Under these circumstances, how can you prevent the dream-like seeds of Birth and Death from sprouting anew?

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Letter 12

Pure Land and Mind-Only[12]

Question One: Are the Mind-Only Pure Land and the Self-Nature Amitabha the same as or different from the Western Pure Land and Amitabha in the Pure Land?

Answer: It is because the Mind-Only Pure Land exists that we are reborn in the Pure Land of the West. If the mind is not pure, it is impossible to achieve rebirth in the Pure Land. Even when those who have committed cardinal transgressions achieve rebirth through ten recitations, such rebirth is due to their reciting the Buddha's name with a *pure mind*, thus eliciting a response from Amitabha Buddha.

Ordinary people generally think that if the Pure Land is Mind-Only, then it does not exist. This is the understanding of demons and externalists. Such a deluded view, which appears correct but is in reality wrong, affects more than half of all people and causes practitioners to forfeit true benefits.

It is precisely because of the Self-Nature Amitabha that the practitioner must recite the name of Buddha Amitabha of the West seeking rebirth in the Pure Land – so as to achieve the Self-Nature Amitabha through gradual cultivation. If he merely grasps at the Buddha Amitabha of the West, he cannot achieve immediate escape from Birth and Death – not even if he is truly awakened, much less if (like most people who ask this question) he is pretentious and just indulges in empty talk without engaging in practice.

Thus, the answer to your question [are the Mind-Only Pure Land and the Self-Nature Amitabha the same as or different from the Western Pure Land and Amitabha in the Pure Land?] is that they are *one yet two* before Buddhahood is attained, *two yet one* after Buddhahood is attained.

Question Two: What is the meaning of the statement: "birth [in the Pure Land] is certainly birth, but returning [to the Pure Land] is, in fact, not returning"?

Answer: "Birth is certainly birth" is from the viewpoint of phenomena; "Returning is, in fact, not returning" is from the viewpoint of principle or noumenon.

[12] Letter to the layman Ch'u. (VN ed., p. 140)

However, those who have not yet penetrated the subtle difference between noumenon and phenomena should just follow phenomena and marks, and recite the Buddha's name in an accomplished manner. In this way, they will achieve results. Otherwise, they will make the mistake, common to externalists and demons, of grasping at noumenon and abandoning phenomena.

Question Three: *Some people say: "To see the Buddha is to see the Buddha of the Self-Mind, not the Buddha of the Western Pure Land." This being the case, at the time of death, is it the Buddha of the Self-Mind who appears, or is it Buddha Amitabha who comes to receive and guide us?*

Answer: Seeing the Buddha at the time of death is due to our own Self-Mind, which has elicited a response from Amitabha Buddha. You should not revert everything to the Self-Mind and think that there is no Buddha Amitabha arriving to receive and guide you!

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Letter 13

Open Letter to Cultivators[13]

The following lines are simple and unadorned, yet their teachings are based on the sutras. Anyone who acts accordingly will receive truly immense benefits. (Patriarch Yin Kuang.)

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I) The Pure Land method embraces people of all capacities, gathering in those of high as well as low capacities. It is the great Dharma of the Tathagata, whereby He provides an expedient enabling both sages and ordinary beings to achieve liberation from Birth and Death and reach the stage of non-retrogression in this very lifetime.

Not to believe in and practice this sublime, special Dharma is truly regrettable, a great pity indeed!

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The main tenets of Pure Land are Faith, Vows and Practice.

Faith: You should believe that the Saha World is filled with the Eight Sufferings; believe that the Western Pure Land is filled with immense joy; believe that as ordinary beings full of evil karma, you cannot, realistically, rely on your own strength (self-power) alone to eliminate delusion completely, realize the Truth and escape Birth and Death in this very lifetime; believe that Amitabha Buddha has made a profound and lofty Vow – any sentient being who recites His name [with utmost faith and sincerity] seeking rebirth in His land will, at the time of death, be received and guided to the Pure Land.

Vows: You should aspire to transcend this world and achieve rebirth in that blissful Land as soon as possible.

[13]Letter to all followers (VN ed., p. 145)

Practice: You should practice Buddha Recitation in all earnestness and sincerity, without a moment's lapse, paying respect and reciting morning and evening before your altar. You can establish an intensive or a leisurely schedule depending on your own circumstances.

Outside of these sessions, you should constantly recite the Buddha's name while walking, standing, sitting, reclining or engaging in other actions that do not require intense intellectual activity. When resting, you should recite silently, uttering only the two words "Amitabha Buddha" to facilitate concentration. You should also recite silently when not properly dressed or when doing household chores, bathing, urinating or defecating, or when walking to and from unclean places. This silent recitation brings the same benefits as reciting aloud. In the latter circumstances, loud recitation is improper and could reflect disrespect. Whether reciting loudly or softly or engaging in "diamond recitation" or silent recitation, you should be attentive and keep each utterance clearly and distinctly in mind, the mouth reciting clearly and distinctly and the ears hearing clearly and distinctly.

When you recite in this way, the mind is no longer chasing after external realms, deluded thoughts cease and recitation gradually becomes pure and focussed – the virtues accrued are thus immense.

II) Buddha Recitation practitioners should dedicate all virtues toward rebirth in the Pure Land, whether they are earned through reciting sutras and mantras, paying respect to the Buddhas, practicing repentance, rescuing victims of accidents or disasters, or helping the needy. You should not seek the merits and blessings of the human and celestial realms either in this lifetime or the next. If you have such thoughts, you will lose the benefit of rebirth in the Pure Land and drown in the sea of Birth and Death.

You should know that the more blessings you enjoy, the greater the evil karma you are likely to create, making it exceedingly difficult to avoid the path of hells, hungry ghosts and animality in the third lifetime. At that point, it will be more difficult to recover the human form and hear the Pure Land Dharma of liberation in one lifetime than to achieve rebirth as a celestial!

Sakyamuni Buddha taught the method of reciting Amitabha Buddha's name, seeking rebirth in the Western Pure Land, in order to help sentient beings resolve the problem of Birth and Death in this very lifetime. If you aspire to gain the blessings of the celestial and human realms in the next lifetime, you are going counter to the teachings of the Buddhas. It is like exchanging a priceless pearl for a piece of candy – how truly regrettable!

III) Pure Land cultivators should not follow Zen meditation practices. This is because most Zen followers fail to stress the issue of rebirth in the Pure Land through Faith and Vows. Even if they practice Buddha Recitation, they merely stress the koan "who is reciting the Buddha's name?" seeking an Awakening. Pure Land practitioners should recite Amitabha Buddha's name for the sole purpose

of achieving rebirth in the Pure Land. Once having seen Amitabha Buddha, why worry about not having experienced an Awakening?

In this Saha World, it may be possible to escape Birth and Death through meditation if all delusive karma is eliminated. If, however, all delusive karma is not eliminated, the Zen follower not only cannot rely on his own strength (self-power) to achieve liberation, he cannot – lacking Faith and Vows – rely on the Buddha's power (other-power) to escape Birth and Death either. Unable to rely either on self-power or on other-power, how can he escape the sufferings of this world?

You should know that even the Dharma Body Bodhisattvas [i.e., the higher level Bodhisattvas] must rely on the power of the Buddhas – not to mention ordinary beings such as ourselves, who are full of karmic obstructions. Who are we to keep weighing the pros and cons of our own strength, while failing to seek the Buddhas' help? Our words may be lofty, but upon reflection, the accompanying actions are low and wanting! The difference between other-power and self-power is as great as the heavens and the abyss! I hope fellow-cultivators will carefully examine and forgive my straightforward words.

IV) From the age of twelve or thirteen, until they reach forty-eight or forty-nine, women all have menstrual periods. Some people teach that women should not bow or engage in Buddha and Sutra Recitation during those times. Such advice is certainly not consonant with feelings or reason. The periods may last from a minimum of two or three days to about six or seven. Buddha Recitation practitioners need to cultivate without interruption, so how can they abandon their cultivation over a little bit of natural discomfort? During those times, women should merely shorten the bowing part of the sessions but keep to their regular schedule of Sutra and Buddha Recitation. They should change their protective clothing and wash their hands often, so that they do not finger the rosary, turn the pages of sutras or light incense with dirty hands.

Within the Dharma, each and every method is perfect and unimpeded. Externalists, on the other hand, grasp one-sidedly at theory and noumenon. Ordinary people tend to believe their words, are unclear about the true teachings of Buddhism and thus cannot saturate themselves with the benefits of the Dharma.

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This ordinary monk has grown old and feeble lately, while his mind and spirit deteriorate with each passing day. He therefore regrets being unable to answer all of the many letters he has received.

It is only because of easy means of communication that people near and far hear of my little bit of empty fame and send me too many letters, seeking the Dharma. If

I fail to answer the letters, I have, to some extent, turned my back on the senders. However, in truth, I do not have the energy to reply to each and every one of them. Therefore, I had this letter printed to answer everyone, far and wide.

As time goes by, whenever someone writes to ask about the Dharma, I always reply with this letter. If there are specific points to be addressed, I may add a few lines here and there on the original letter. In this way, we can communicate in thought while I minimize fatigue.

Anyone who wishes to comprehend fully the meaning behind the sutras should direct his inquiries to those Dharma Masters who have raised the Dharma platform high and are thoroughly versed in the various methods and teachings. However, you should realize that even if you have fathomed the sutras and the Dharma, it is not certain that you will be able to escape the cycle of Birth and Death. To escape Birth, Death and transmigration, you should focus on Faith, Vows and reciting Amitabha Buddha's name seeking rebirth in the Pure Land!

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Letter 14

All Conditioned Dharmas are Like Dreams, Phantoms, Bubbles, Shadows![14]

Many years have passed since we last met but I have thought of you often. Last autumn, when your esteemed brother took the regional civil service examination, he brought your letter to P'u T'o Mountain. Only then did I learn about your cultivation in recent years.

I recall that you had met with great misfortune, having lost your beloved son, and that you were grieving day in and day out, seldom at peace. I wanted to write you in detail about Cause and Effect at that time, but, because of time constraints, I could only send you a short letter.

Today being the last full moon of the year, Master Ch'e Ch'uan visited our mountain. During our conversation, he discussed your plights, as well as the deluded comments of some ignorant people who claim that wholesome deeds bring only misfortune while cultivation brings no benefits. Hearing this, I could not help feeling deeply grieved, lest as a result of your experience, the intelligent grow lax in their cultivation while the dull and ignorant lose all qualms about committing transgressions. I therefore decided to put aside the reservations stemming from my humble background to share some plain, straightforward thoughts with you.

In the sutras, the Buddhas always teach that a) the consequences/requital of our actions encompass three lifetimes, while b) the birth of a child is generally associated with four causes.

a) The consequences/requital are:

– current requital;
– birth [next lifetime] requital;
– future requital.

"Current requital" refers to the misfortunes and blessings we receive in *this very lifetime* from the transgressions we commit and the wholesome deeds we perform. As an example, we have candidates for the civil service who study hard, pass their examinations and are appointed to high positions. Such occurrences can be seen by our ordinary human eyes.

[14]Letter to the layman Lin Chieh-sheng. (Chinese ed. Vol. I, p. 74)

“Birth requital” means committing transgressions and performing wholesome deeds in this lifetime but only obtaining the results, good or bad, of such actions in the *next lifetime*. Take the case of a family patriarch who stresses education and refinement but who only achieves success through his children and grandchildren. Such occurrences cannot [always] be seen with our human eyes, but those endowed with the Celestial Eye can perceive them.

“Future requital” means committing transgressions or performing wholesome deeds in this lifetime but not obtaining the results until the third, fourth or thousandth lifetime, or, indeed *untold eons in the future*. This is the case of some royal dynasties which only flourish and reach their apogee several generations down the line ...

The Celestial Eye can see events three or four lifetimes away but is powerless with respect to events several hundred thousand lifetimes away. The Eye of the Arhat, however, can see them clearly. As to events occurring untold eons ago or hence, only the perfectly enlightened Tathagata Eye can see them clearly. Such realms are not even in the domain of the Arhat’s Eye, much less those of celestial or human beings.

Knowing that requital spans three generations, you should realize that the words of the sages concerning Cause and Effect have never been wrong and that wealth and poverty, honor and disgrace, longevity and early death are all the results of past actions – where is the discrepancy between cause and effect? A mirror reflects beauty and ugliness as they are. The wise know that it is the object before the mirror that should be changed while the dull and ignorant waste time and effort hating and resenting the image in the mirror! To bear adversity is to know your limitations. Only by not resenting heaven and earth can you succeed in life.

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b) Children are born from four causes:

– repaying past kindness;
– repaying past wrongs;
– repaying past debts;
– claiming past debts.

“Repaying past kindness” means that the child incurred a debt of gratitude to the parents in a previous lifetime. To repay it, he or she has come to be born in the parents’ household and will attend painstakingly to their needs throughout life. He will ensure that they are well provided for while alive and receive decent burials and offerings after death. The child may even perform great public service, helping the country and the people, his name being remembered in history. Thus, when

future generations honor him, they will extend their respect and admiration to his parents. Devoted children and virtuous grandchildren, nowadays, generally belong to this category.

"Repaying past wrongs" means that in a past lifetime, the parents committed some wrong toward their present children. Therefore, the children have come to be born in their household seeking retribution. Thus, when still young, the children will be unruly and when grown, they will create misfortune and calamities implicating their parents. In old age the parents will be left in want, while their treatment after death will not only dishonor them, the shame will extend to the ancestors as well. At times, when holding key government positions, the children may even engage in criminal acts, causing the family's assets to be seized, the lineage exterminated and the graves of the ancestors dug up and desecrated. Thus, when future generations abuse and revile them, they will also hate and despise their parents.

"Repaying past debts" means that the child has come to be reborn in his parents' household because, in a previous lifetime, he incurred a debt toward them. If it is a great debt, repayment can take the parents' entire lifetime. If the debt is modest, repayment can cover part of the parents' lifetime ... Thus, for example, some children assist their parents in business, only to die suddenly as the enterprise becomes profitable.

"Claiming past debts" means that, in a past lifetime, the parents incurred some obligation toward their child, who has now been born in their household in order to claim payment. If the debt is small, the parents will merely have to spend money to feed and clothe him, attend to his health and education, find him a spouse and train him to establish himself in the community. Once the debt is paid, the child will die suddenly. If the debt is sizeable, the child may sometimes deplete all of the parents' assets before dying.

It would seem to me that your son comes under the last category. Fortunately, because your debt is modest, he has passed away suddenly at an early age. You should therefore repent your previous bad karma and strive to cultivate earnestly. Even the great sage Confucius lost his only son when the latter was in mid-life. The great sage Yen Yuan had but a short life. Another ancient sage was destitute, always in want, while yet another died a martyr ... Do you perhaps think that sages and saints are punished by the heavens for cultivating virtues? Or is it because life and death, wealth and honor are determined by past karma?

Thus, you should only deplore the fact that your virtues are still wanting and not waste time pondering misfortunes and blessings! If you are repentant and strive to cultivate earnestly, the god of blessings will come your way while misfortune and calamity will bypass you – naturally.

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During their lives, people are subject to all the Eight Sufferings. Even if they are reborn in the heavens, they cannot escape the Five Signs of Decay. Only the Western Land of Ultimate Bliss is all joy and no suffering. Who knows, perhaps it is precisely thanks to your work in spreading the Pure Land Dharma that the deities used the premature passing of your beloved son as an awakening needle to prick the top of your head. You may thus clearly realize that the Triple Realm knows no peace; it is like a burning house, filled with frightful suffering. The lot of humans is subject to the god of impermanence, as we are born and die in the space of a bolt of lightning. When our time has come, no one can save anyone else.

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All conditioned dharmas are like dreams, phantoms, bubbles, shadows. If, even now, you have not awakened and do not strive earnestly to practice Pure Land, you are no more alive than wood and stones! How can anyone with grit and determination bear to be a mere mass of flesh running hither and yon, a walking corpse while alive, and once dead, decaying along with the weeds and the trees! How can you have the heart to consign yourself to the world of the ordinary and the deluded while always extolling the realm of the saints? If after encountering such an eye-opening circumstance [as the death of your son], you still do not redouble your efforts, if after hearing the True Dharma, you still do not follow it, are the Buddhas turning their backs on sentient beings, or are sentient beings turning their backs on the Buddhas?

As you are someone of intelligence and wisdom, I hope you will think carefully about what I have just said.

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Letter 15

A Little Bit of Knowledge is Ignorance[15]

Receiving your poetic letter from afar, I cannot but feel embarrassed! From an early age, this old monk has lacked education. My knowledge is uncertain and nebulous. Having drifted here and there for many years, far away from my native village, I am now sojourning on P'u T'o Mountain. Never did I expect that such a remarkable person as yourself, a scholar versed in the Mind-Dharma of Confucianism and Buddhism, who has studied at the feet of masters far and wide and made their outstanding practices his own, would condescend to seek advice from me. Moreover, you have praised me so excessively that my mind is perplexed and uneasy.

I venture to think that with your broad, well-rounded education and your lofty, far-reaching knowledge, you surely cannot have doubts about such ordinary matters as those raised in your letter. It must be that your intention is to act as an example, to show the Way to those who cultivate alongside you.

However, since you have presented knowledge as ignorance, there is nothing to prevent me from presenting ignorance as knowledge and I will try to answer your questions in the order raised. I certainly would never dare imitate the old mandarin who sits as a judge but is in reality an aging student submitting his examination papers. Therefore, if the following explanations contain errors, please revise and amend them.

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1) Although the mind is what matters most in Buddha Recitation, oral recitation should not be disparaged. This is because body, speech and mind reinforce one another. Although the mind may be focussed on Amitabha Buddha, if the body does not bow respectfully and the mouth does not recite, it is difficult to receive benefits. For example, even when lifting heavy objects, ordinary people assist themselves by shouting aloud; how can you not do at least as much when trying to concentrate the mind and attain samadhi! Thus, the *Great Heap Sutra* teaches:

> To recite loudly is to see a tall Buddha, to recite softly is to see a small Buddha.

[15] Letter to the layman P'u Ta-fan. (Chinese ed. Vol. I, p. 31)

The ancient masters have also said:

> Reciting loudly, we see a large, tall body of the Buddha; reciting softly, we see a small, short body of the Buddha.

Ordinary beings often have lethargic, scattered minds. If they are not "assisted" by their bodies and mouths, it is difficult for them to achieve one-pointedness of mind.

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2) Only at the level of Ultimate Truth is there no longer birth and extinction. Except for that, what Buddhist practice is not within the realm of birth and extinction? Even the practices of the Bodhisattvas at the Equal Enlightenment stage (who have achieved virtual equality with the Buddhas, destroyed the forty-one parts of ignorance and attained the forty-one parts of the Secret Store) are not beyond grasping and rejection, birth and extinction – not to mention Buddha Recitation as practiced by ordinary beings.

However, while *birth and extinction* are the roots of *Birth and Death*, they are also the very roots of Enlightenment. Birth and extinction depend entirely on the individual. To gather the six senses together in pure, uninterrupted recitation is precisely to convert the birth and extinction which abandons *Enlightenment for worldly dusts* into the birth and extinction which abandons *worldly dusts for Enlightenment* – as you strive to attain the True Thusness Buddha-Nature free of birth and extinction.

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3) "Only if thought after thought is on the Pure Land can rebirth be achieved," refers to the condition of those who will be reborn in the *upper lotus grades*. If we hold onto this truth and seek the highest grade of rebirth for ourselves, nothing could be better. However, if we hold onto it to teach those of moderate and low capacities, we will greatly hinder their progress.

Why is this so? It is because they may find this method too lofty, resign themselves to their lowly condition and refuse to cultivate.

Moreover, although Buddha Recitation centers on the mind-consciousness, it encompasses all other consciousnesses as well. Do the sutras not mention "gathering the six senses together"? If the six senses are gathered together, the six consciousnesses will also be gathered together. Even registering the words

"Amitabha Buddha" in the Alaya Consciousness must be achieved through the six consciousnesses.

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4) The comment "recite the Buddha's name without a break, so that a knife cannot cut through" should not give rise to any doubts. However, such doubts arise simply because you have not yet clearly delineated the boundaries between Zen and Pure Land and between self-power and other-power.

The Buddha Recitation practitioner relies on the Vow-power of Amitabha Buddha to escape the Triple Realm and achieve rebirth in the Pure Land. If you do not vow to achieve rebirth, you certainly cannot have Faith either. Merely reciting the Buddha's name, without Faith and Vows, falls in the category of self-power. Without Faith and Vows, the practitioner cannot merge with the Vow-power of Amitabha Buddha.

If you can sever all delusions of views and delusions of thought, you may achieve rebirth in the Pure Land. However, if you have not severed them, or you have failed to sever them completely, the roots of evil karma remain and you are still subject to Birth and Death ... You should know that ignoring Faith and Vows while reciting the Buddha's name is no different from Zen meditation practice. If you were to achieve rebirth in the Pure Land under such circumstances, how could Cause and Effect be reconciled? Elder Master Ou I has said:

> To achieve rebirth in the Pure Land or not depends entirely upon Faith and Vows; the grade of rebirth (high or low) depends on whether one's practice of Buddha Recitation is deep or shallow.

This is a true statement not subject to change.

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5) Relying on self-power alone, you cannot escape the cycle of rebirth as long as you still have even a trace of karmic delusion at the time of death – not to mention if you have a great deal.

Reciting the Buddha's name to the level of one-pointedness of mind *without Faith and Vows* – perhaps a few out of countless individuals may achieve rebirth in the Pure Land. Thus, you should by no means teach this approach and squander the good Pure Land roots of future generations. This is because it is difficult to find even a few cultivators in this whole world who can recite to the point of "extinction

of karma and emptiness of desire" and attain the Tolerance of Non-Birth, by relying on self-power alone.

Therefore, if everyone followed this approach in cultivation and failed to stress Faith and Vows, countless sentient beings would drown in the sea of suffering – their escape route blocked.

A single statement can cause so much harm. Not realizing how arrogant they are, those who advocate such doctrines consider themselves very perceptive and profound. Little do they realize that their words are deluded and insane – severing the "wisdom-life" of the Buddhas and leading sentient beings to err and harbor doubts. What a great pity indeed!

The Pure Land method should be considered a special Dharma method, not to be compared with other general teachings of the Buddhas.

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Letter 16

Bodhisattvas Fear Causes, Sentient Beings Fear Results[16]

(A layman's house was burned to the ground and everything was lost. His wife, distraught, became seriously ill. The man then lost all his sense of right and wrong, as though insane. Master Yin Kuang sent this letter to console and counsel him.)

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The *Lotus Sutra* (Chapter 3) states:

> There is no peace in the Triple Realm. It is like a burning house, full of suffering. It is frightening indeed.

Nevertheless, individuals at times achieve awakening through such circumstances as misfortune or blessings, conflict or harmony, suffering or joy, etc. ... The means of achieving awakening are not fixed. To the wise, who know how to adapt flexibly to circumstances and are at peace with their lot, there is no suffering that is not joy, no conflict that is not harmony, no misfortune that is not a blessing.

Therefore, the wise man is at peace with himself and others, understands human destiny, does not resent the heavens or blame his fellow beings and is always even-tempered, peaceful and calm, regardless of circumstances. The ancients had a saying:

> In circumstances of wealth and nobility, he is at peace with wealth and nobility; in circumstances of poverty and deprivation, he is at peace with poverty and deprivation; in circumstances of rudeness and vulgarity, he is at peace with rudeness and vulgarity; in circumstances of adversity and misfortune, he is at peace with adversity and misfortune ...

Although you enjoy performing good deeds, you do not yet understand the essence of Confucianism and Buddhism and are thus confused and frightened after a single instance of adversity. Let me cite a few examples to clarify your understanding.

[16]Letter to the layman Wei Ch'in-chou. (Chinese ed. Vol. I, p. 67)

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There is nothing in the universe vaster, higher or brighter than Heaven and Earth, the sun and the moon. However, once the sun has reached its zenith, it begins to set; once the moon is full, it wanes. Even the high mountains will in time give way to deep ravines and the vast oceans will be replaced by fields of mulberry. The human condition is the same: the advance and decline of our fortunes, as well as other changes, are merely the norm.

From ancient times to the present, who could surpass Confucius in morality and virtue? Nevertheless, even he was once surrounded by enemies, his life threatened. On another occasion, he was down to his last reserves while at yet another point he was getting nowhere in his efforts to travel and disseminate his teachings throughout the various kingdoms. Worse, his only son died suddenly at the age of fifty.

Confucius and others like him were great sages and saints, yet they could not escape adversity. However, they knew how to live in harmony with their circumstances and so managed to keep their minds calm and at peace.

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During our lives, we make all kinds of plans and perform all kinds of tasks but, in retrospect, they essentially revolve around the issues of food, clothing and the desire to leave some legacy behind for our children. Yet, as far as food is concerned, a bowl of soup and some fresh vegetables should suffice; why seek exquisite seafood and mountain delicacies? As for clothing, a few simple garments should amply cover our bodies; what is the use of a wardrobe filled with brocade and satin? As for our children, they can study, till the fields or engage in small business; what is the use of wealth running into the millions?

Besides, who in the history of China can surpass the Emperor Ch'in Shih Huang in scheming for fame and fortune for his descendants? This brutal ruler subdued the six kingdoms, burned books, buried scholars alive and confiscated all weapons converting them into bells, all for the purpose of keeping the populace ignorant and powerless and thus preventing insurrection. However, with the uprising of Ch'en She, heroes sprang up everywhere. The Emperor's unification scheme did not last even thirteen years before collapsing, and all his direct descendants were put to death. The Emperor intended that his children be honored, but, in the end, they were defeated and lost everything.

Think about it: how many can be as exalted as the Son of Heaven (Emperor), his wealth extending over the four seas? Yet even he could not ensure lasting

wealth and happiness for his family and clan – not to mention ordinary beings who, throughout the eons, have committed evil karma as thick as the earth's crust and as deep as the oceans! How can they guarantee that their families will flourish forever, always blessed, never encountering setbacks?

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You should know that all things in life are *intrinsically* false, like dreams, illusions, bubbles, shadows, dew or lightning, the moon reflected in a pond, flowers in the mirror, flickering mirages in the blazing sun, Gandharva cities – nothing is true or real. Only the Mind-Nature is everlasting and immutable, encompassing all past and present. Although it neither changes nor dies, it always follows causes and conditions.

If conditions are consonant with awakening and purity, we become Arhats, Pratyeka Buddhas, Bodhisattvas or Buddhas – the level of achievement depending on the depth of our virtues. If conditions are consonant with delusion and impurity, we stray into the realms of gods, humans, asuras, animals, hungry ghosts and hells. The length of our suffering or happiness depends on the weight of our transgressions or merits.

Those who are unaware of the Buddha Dharma cannot be faulted, but as a devout Buddhist, why do you not profit from this painful experience to see life clearly, abandon delusion for awakening and singlemindedly recite the Buddha's name seeking rebirth in the Pure Land – thus escaping Birth and Death and reaching the four levels of sagehood? Would that not be turning a small misfortune into a great blessing?

The way out of your predicament is as described. Why do yo remain troubled and confused, daydreaming as though you have lost your mind? If you lose your life through excessive worry, you will not only wallow in Birth and Death for many lifetimes, your sick wife and orphaned children will have no means of support. Thus, all you will do is harm yourself while hurting others at the same time. How can you be so deluded?

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The sutras teach:

> Bodhisattvas fear causes, sentient beings fear results.

To avoid the result of suffering, Bodhisattvas destroy evil causes in advance. Thus, evil karma is eliminated and virtues are accrued in full, up to the time they become Buddhas. Sentient beings constantly create evil causes but wish to escape the suffering that results. They are no different from those who fear their own shadows but continually run for cover under the glare of the sun. How can they escape their shadows?

Many persons expect huge blessings after performing a few good deeds. When they encounter adversity, they immediately think that "to do good is to meet with misfortune; there is no law of Cause and Effect." From that point on, they regress from their newly awakened state, turn around and vilify the Buddha Dharma. These persons do not understand the truths that "Cause and Effect encompass three lifetimes" and "the mind can change the environment for the better."

How do Cause and Effect encompass three lifetimes? As an example, in this lifetime we may perform wholesome or evil deeds, as a result of which we receive benefits or suffer vicissitudes. This is a case of current requital.

If we perform wholesome or evil deeds in this lifetime and receive benefits or suffer vicissitudes in the next lifetime, it is a case of birth [next lifetime] requital.

If we perform wholesome or evil deeds in this lifetime but only receive benefits or suffer vicissitudes in the third or fourth lifetime, or even the tenth, hundredth, or thousandth lifetime, or countless eons in the future – it is a case of future requital.

The time frame of future requital is not fixed. However, to create "causes" is to create "effects and consequences." This is a natural occurrence.

In what way can our minds change the environment for the better? Take the case of a person who has performed evil deeds and should be condemned to the sufferings of the hells for untold eons. Suppose that individual suddenly becomes extremely frightened and utterly ashamed, develops the Bodhi Mind, changes his ways, recites sutras and the Buddha's name, cultivates personally and enjoins others to do likewise, seeking rebirth in the Pure Land. Thanks to this change of heart, the previous karma of hell is dissipated and transmuted into a lesser karma in the current lifetime. Thus, for example, he may be subject to contempt by others, suffer a bout of illness, become destitute or meet with unhappy events. After enduring such minor retribution, that person may escape Birth and Death and enter the "stream of the sages," transcending the ordinary world. As the *Diamond Sutra* states:

> If there is anyone who receives and keeps this Sutra but is maligned by others, such a person has created evil karma in previous lifetimes and should have descended upon the Evil Paths. As a result of this calumny, however, his past karma is instantly extinguished and he will attain Supreme Enlightenment.

This is precisely the meaning of the mind changing life and the environment for the better.

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When ordinary beings meet disaster, if they do not resent the heavens, they blame their fellow-beings. Very few think of repaying their karma and developing a mind of repentance and reform. You should know that "if you plant melons, you reap melons, if you plant beans, you reap beans." This is the natural course of events. Having sown thorns, do not expect, when the harvest comes, to have wheat and rice. If those who create evil still enjoy blessings, it is because in previous lifetimes they amassed great blessings; if not for their transgressions, their blessings would have been much greater.

It is as if the scion of a wealthy family were to lead a dissipated life, lusting and gambling, squandering money like so much dirt, without suffering hunger and cold immediately because of his great fortune. Yet, if he were to continue in this manner day in and day out, even with a family estate in the millions, one day he would surely lose all his property and suffer an premature death.

If those who perform wholesome deeds customarily meet with misfortune, it is because they planted the seeds of transgression deeply in past lifetimes. If not for their good deeds, their misfortunes would have been much worse.

This is similar to the case of a condemned prisoner, who manages to perform a small public service while waiting for his sentence to be carried out. Because of the limited impact of his contribution, he cannot yet be pardoned; therefore his sentence is merely commuted to a lighter one. If he continues to contribute to the public good and the sum total of such contributions becomes sizeable, not only will his previous transgressions be wiped away, he may even receive honors, high position and noble rank, with his descendants inheriting honors for generations!

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A superior person should transcend ordinary events and not allow external circumstances to damage his very life. Suppose his storeroom is overflowing with gold and jewelry. When renegade soldiers and outlaws come to steal them, he should abandon his house and escape, rather than risk death in order to hold on to his riches. This is because gold and jewelry may be precious, but they cannot be compared to life. If we cannot safeguard both, property should be abandoned and life preserved.

Now that your wealth and property have been reduced to ashes, it is useless to worry excessively or cry over their loss. You should adapt to conditions, carry on and strive to recite the Buddha's name, seeking rebirth in the Pure Land, so that you may be spared suffering and enjoy only happiness until the end of time. Thus,

thanks to this catastrophe, you will ultimately attain Buddhahood. Why continue in delusion – suffering and grieving?

I hope that you will consider my words carefully. You will then get over your grief, clearing the sky of dark clouds and revealing its brightness, finding happiness in calamity and exchanging intense heat for a cool, joyous breeze. Otherwise, if you continue to dwell on your loss and fail to awaken, you will not escape insanity. Once the Self-Mind is lost, demons will enter. At that time, even if a thousand Buddhas were to appear on earth, they would have no way of saving you!

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Letter 17

The Five Skandas are All Empty![17]

In Shanghai recently there were many gatherings where revelations and prophecies were proclaimed. Their messages about abandoning evil ways and practicing wholesome deeds, as well as their pronouncements on Birth and Death, Cause and Effect, while superficial and limited, are very useful for everyday morality and the minds of ordinary persons. However the points they made concerning the future and the Buddha Dharma are somewhat vague and not free of error. As disciples of the Buddhas, we should not oppose or reject those pronouncements, because doing so may hinder the good actions of others. At the same time, however, we should not repeat or extol them, lest we be guilty of chimerical statements and conjectures that bring harm and disorder to the Dharma and engender doubts among the people.

This old monk, knowing himself to be beset with many karmic obstructions, would not dare abandon reason for emotion and thus cause others to err. He begs the reader to take both emotion and reason into account when following his advice, in order to avoid harmful actions.

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Think this over: the word "samadhi" is translated as correct concentration. It is the state of dissipation of delusion and emergence of the Truth – tranquil and bright. How can there be any realm or state within it? Therefore, the *Surangama Sutra* states:

> Perfect attainment of the fruit of Enlightenment is non-attainment of anything.

The Zen practitioner relies only on his own strength (self-power) without seeking the Buddhas' assistance. Therefore, when he exerts himself to the limit in cultivation, the true and the false assail each other, giving rise to many states and realms that suddenly appear and disappear.

[17]Letter to a layman in Yungchia. (Chinese ed. Vol. I, p. 99)

It is as though a heavy rain is abating. The dark clouds disperse, the overcast sky suddenly clears; things change back and forth without warning. These states and realms are difficult for those who do not possess transcendental vision to distinguish. If the cultivator mistakenly considers these manifestations to be true, he is immediately possessed by "demons," and becomes insane.

On the other hand, when the Pure Land practitioner earnestly recites Buddha Amitabha's name and His ten thousand virtues, it is like the sun shining in the middle of empty space or a walk along a broad, straight path. Not only are demons and evil spirits nowhere in sight, but deluded thoughts disappear as well.

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Ultimately, when the practitioner recites to the point of pure, unmixed power, *the totality of Mind is Buddha, the totality of Buddha is Mind, Mind and Buddha are as one.* I am afraid that this principle and practice are not understood by everyone. It has always been my desire to proclaim them and to disseminate the Original Vows of Amitabha Buddha to rescue all sentient beings. How would I dare conceal this truth, transmitting it privately to you alone? If there is any secret knowledge to be transmitted privately in a hidden place, it is an externalist teaching, not a Buddhist teaching.

Having said so, however, this old monk, in truth, does have a wonderful secret teaching, which only he possesses. Since you have requested it today, I have no qualms about revealing it to all Buddhist followers. What is this wonderful teaching? It is *utter sincerity and profound respect.* This secret is known to everyone, yet obscure to all!

Wishing to eradicate deep-seated karma and repay the kindness of the Buddhas, I have endeavored, day in and day out, to probe the shining cultivation of the ancients. I have thus discovered that utter sincerity and profound respect constitute a wonderful "secret" method that lifts human beings to the realms of the saints, enabling them to escape Birth and Death. Time and again I have brought these points to the attention of those who have the right conditions. You should know that *sincerity* and *respect* are not reserved exclusively to students of the Dharma, but form the basis of all activities that you want to complete to perfection.

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You have planted wholesome roots in previous lifetimes and belong to a family imbued with Buddhism for many generations. In your youth, you were well brought up at home and later on, for some twenty to thirty years, you attended school and

experienced the ways of the world fully. Why have you decided to abandon the lofty and sublime to stoop to the common and ordinary, placing such value on my writings and distributing them to others?

You should know that the most important criteria in dissemination of the Dharma for the benefit of sentient beings are "timing" and "capacities."

Those who are well-versed in Buddhism have failed to point out the most relevant cure for today's illnesses. Instead, all they do is discourse on lofty, sublime methods which, generally speaking, are not the right medicine. Sometimes, this very medicine, however valuable, intensifies the illness. This old monk is like an inexperienced physician – not only is he unclear about the roots of disease, he does not know the properties of the medication either. He merely prescribes a panacea transmitted "secretly" by ancient sages and saints and dispenses it against each and every symptom, such as falsity or truth, chills or fever. Anyone with faith in the medicine who tries it will recover. Even those afflicted with "incurable" diseases, forsaken by the greatest Immortal physicians, will immediately regain strength and escape death as soon as they take this medicine.

Therefore, I have no hesitation about hanging out my shingle for those who wish to rescue sentient beings and benefit mankind, advertising this medicine to all who are ill. I do realize that the remedies prescribed by those Immortal physicians are miraculous, but I do not advise people to take them – as illnesses stem from past karma and cannot be cured by physicians, however divine.

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Heavy karmic obstructions, excessive greed and anger, a weak and ailing body, a fearful, apprehensive mind – these symptoms will, in time, disappear naturally if you singlemindedly recite the Buddha's name. The "Avalokitesvara [twenty-fifth] Chapter" of the *Lotus Sutra* states:

> If ... living beings much given to carnal passion keep in mind and revere the Bodhisattva Regarder of the Cries of the World, they will be set free from their passion. If [those] much given to irascibility [hatred and anger] keep in mind and revere the Bodhisattva Regarder of the Cries of the World, they will be set free from their delusion. (B. Kato, et al, *The Threefold Lotus Sutra*, p. 320.)

The same is true of reciting the Buddha's name. However, you should concentrate your mind to the utmost and put a stop to "sundry [distracting] thoughts," doubts and uncertainties. Whatever you seek will then materialize. As the Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara has great affinities with sentient beings in the Saha World, you should, in addition to your regular Pure Land sessions, recite Her name. Alternatively, you may also recite the Surangama Mantra or the Great Compassion Mantra.

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If you wish to be a Dharma master, lecturing on the sutras in public, you should first read the original texts, then study the commentaries and subcommentaries. However, should you discover that your intellect is average and your understanding not necessarily above others, you should concentrate on Buddha Recitation rather than wasting time and energy pursuing these non-essential endeavors.

If, on the other hand, you would like to engage in Sutra Recital in accordance with your limited capacities for the benefits it confers, you should keep the three karmas of body, speech and mind utterly pure, earnest and sincere, bow to the Buddhas and sit erect concentrating your mind for a moment or two, before opening a sutra to read aloud or silently. At that time, you should sit up straight as though you were facing the Buddhas, listening to their perfect voices, without a single lazy, discriminating thought. Then, *without trying to find the meaning of the sutra*, just recite it in one stretch from beginning to end.

By reciting the sutras in such a manner, if you are of superior spirituality, you can awaken to the Non-Dual Truth and reach the Dharma of True Mark. Even if you are dull and of low capacity, you will gain increased merit and wisdom, eradicating karmic obstructions in the process. The Sixth Patriarch once said:

> We can awaken our Mind and see our True Nature just by reciting the *Diamond Sutra*.

This quote refers to the practice of Sutra Recital as explained above. It is therefore called "samatha" (stopping or arresting mental processes). If you follow these steps, reciting any Mahayana sutra can lead to the opening of the Mind, the seeing of your True Nature. This does not apply to the *Diamond Sutra* alone.

You should not use the discriminating mind, trying to understand the meaning of this sentence, the idea behind that paragraph, as all this belongs to the realm of deluded thought, reasoning and comparing. Such a mind cannot be in silent accord with the Buddha Mind, lead to a thorough understanding of the essence of the sutras or provide the causes and conditions for eradicating transgressions and creating blessings.

Practicing Sutra Recital with a discriminating mind, if accompanied by reverential thoughts, may lead to the sowing of a few wholesome karmic seeds. If, on the other hand, it is accompanied by laziness and arrogant thoughts, it cannot fail to generate evil consequences from these very same seeds – the resulting suffering will be immense!

Once, while reciting a sutra, the Patriarch Chih I [founder of the T'ien T'ai school] suddenly experienced a Great Awakening and silently entered samadhi. If he had had a discriminating mind at that time, how could he possibly have

succeeded in such a manner? Another master was copying the *Lotus Sutra*, completely oblivious to the ten thousand conditions (i.e., everything). He was still at his desk writing long after the sun had set when his disciple walked in and said: "It is so late already, how can you, Master, still be copying the sutra?" The monk was startled to discover that it was so dark he could not even see his hand!

Whether reciting the sutras, meditating, chanting mantras or reciting the Buddha's name, as long as you do it with this level of concentration and persevere for a long time, one day you will understand all and everything and experience a Great Awakening (awaken to the Way).

Thus, during the Ming dynasty, there was a Zen monk by the name of Hsueh Ch'iao Hsin. He had entered the Order in midlife and was completely illiterate. Nevertheless, thanks to his strict observance of austerities, assiduous meditation, extreme forbearance and other difficult practices, before long he suddenly experienced a Great Awakening. Whatever he said after that was in accordance with the Perfect Teaching. From then on, he gradually came to know how to read and write. In a relatively short time, he was transformed into a scholar fully at ease in the exposition of the Dharma. During the Ch'ing period, his writings were incorporated into the Mahayana canon.

Such benefits all stem from a mind completely focussed on meditation, with no discriminating thoughts. Those who practice Sutra Recital should take these examples as models. *Thus, when engaging in Sutra Recital, you absolutely must avoid the development of a discriminating mind.* In this way deluded thoughts will settle themselves at the bottom, while your transcendental Original Nature will gradually reveal itself.

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However, if you wish to study the sutras to understand their profound meaning or write commentaries upon them, you should reserve a special period of time to concentrate exclusively on such activity. At that time, it may not be necessary to be as strict and respectful as during Sutra Recital, but you should not adopt an irreverent attitude – at most, you can be a little more relaxed.

If you have not succeeded in extinguishing evil karma and developing wisdom, you should consider Sutra Recital as your main objective and sutra study as secondary. Otherwise, you will waste months and years pursuing such studies. Even if you were to understand the sutras to the point of pushing away the clouds and revealing the shining moon, sliding open the shutters and admiring the green mountains, it would merely increase your stock of rationalizations and arguments at the "edge of the lips and the tip of the tongue." What relationship does that bear to the issue of Birth and Death? When the last day of the twelfth month has

come and death is waiting, you could not use the least bit of such knowledge!

If you can follow the Sutra Recital method described above, the various karmas of greed, anger and desire/grasping will gradually disappear and you will develop wisdom. Otherwise, not only will you fail to derive any true benefits, there is the possibility that the power of evil karma accumulated from time immemorial will lead you to develop wrong views and reject Cause and Effect. All the while, the afflictions of lust, killing, stealing and lying will come to the fore one after another like a raging fire. You may even sometimes mistake yourself for a Mahayana luminary, thinking that nothing should be an obstacle, using the Sixth Patriarch's teaching "if the mind is pure, what need is there to keep the precepts," to justify your actions, claiming that "to break the precepts without breaking the precepts is true keeping of the precepts."

There are many such hazards along the path of cultivation, making the True Dharma very difficult to attain! For this reason, the various Patriarchs have generally advocated cultivation of the Pure Land method, relying on the compassionate power of Amitabha Buddha to extinguish evil karmic power, so that it will not flare up.

You should therefore take Buddha Recitation as your principal practice and Sutra Recital as an auxiliary method. You can recite the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, the *Lotus Sutra*, the *Surangama Sutra*, the *Diamond Sutra*, the *Parinirvana Sutra*, the *Sutra of Complete Enlightenment*, etc. one after another or you can limit yourself to one sutra. In either case, you should follow the principles I explained earlier. If you are indifferent and lack restraint and respect, discriminating feelings and views will surely rob you of great benefits. Your evil karma will then know no bounds!

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I used to think that you and your friend were thorough believers in the Pure Land method. However, when I saw the draft of your letter seeking advice from Hsu Chun, I learned of your intention to recite mantras and investigate the Precept-keeping (Discipline) method. You also said: "I have not seen anything mentioned in Pure Land as lofty and sublime as the blessings and virtues derived from reciting mantras; therefore, my mind is undecided and I do not know whether or not I should follow Pure Land."

Look at yourself and see what your capacities are. Why do you wish to understand and penetrate all Dharma methods in such a manner? I only fear that such confusion and indecisiveness will, in time, unsettle and cloud your mind.

As for Hsu Chun, he has said that "according to the Tantric method, wherever the power of mantras goes, be it on a wisp of air or a grain of dust, sentient beings

there will all be liberated. Does the Pure Land method bring such benefits?"

You should know that while reciting mantras brings limitless blessings and virtue, reciting the Buddha's name also has unimaginable power! Do you not recall this passage from the *Meditation Sutra:*

> Even those who have committed the Five Grave Offenses or the Ten Evil Acts, may, on the verge of death, when the marks of the hells appear, recite the Buddha's name a few times, and be reborn immediately in the Pure Land.

Do you not also realize that in the Avatamsaka Assembly, even those Bodhisattvas who have attained the Equal Enlightenment stage (i.e., virtual equality with the Buddhas) must still make the Ten Great Vows, dedicating the merits to rebirth in the Pure Land, so as to perfect the fruit of Enlightenment? Moreover, if the Pure Land were not a lofty, transcendental method, why would the Buddhas and Patriarchs, in countless sutras and commentaries, have all carefully and earnestly recommended its cultivation?

In truth, Mahayana methods are all complete, perfect and sublime; it is only because sentient beings differ in conditions and capacities, some high level and mature, others low level and wanting, that the benefits derived from these methods are different. When the Patriarch Shan Tao – believed to be an incarnation of Amitabha Buddha – was teaching "uninterrupted practice," he was concerned that cultivators were unsettled in mind and will. He therefore wrote:

> Even if the sages of the Four Fruits, the Bodhisattvas at the stages of the Ten Abodes, Ten Practices, Ten Dedications and Ten Grounds, as well as the Buddhas of the ten directions who fill the empty space of the Dharma Realm, should all appear – their bodies emitting rays of light – and request you to abandon the Pure Land method, offering to transmit a loftier method to you, do not dare to follow their words. This is because, having previously resolved with utmost determination to follow the Pure Land method, you cannot go back on your Vows.

The Patriarch Shan Tao uttered these words because he anticipated that those of future generations would "stand on one mountain while dreaming of the other," having no true position. However, these golden words were not followed even by those who venerated him as their direct teacher – much less by those who have not heard or understood them! To be exposed to a method so well adapted to the conditions and capacities of sentient beings and yet to abandon it for the murky path of karmic consciousness – practicing neither Zen nor Pure Land – is this not incitement by evil karma accumulated from time immemorial? What a pity indeed!

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The Non-Dual Truth represents No-Self and No-Dharma.

No-Self (emptiness of self) means true understanding that the five skandas, which together represent body and mind, are all born of causes and conditions. When these come apart, body and mind immediately disappear. There is no real "self" as master.

No-Dharma (emptiness of all phenomena) means true understanding that the five skandas are empty [not only because they are aggregates] but *by their very nature.* Thus, the *Heart Sutra* states:

> Thus, the Boddhisattva Avalokitesvara illumined the five skandas and saw that they were empty.

The truth of Emptiness of all Dharmas is precisely the True Mark, attained through eradication of delusion. Therefore, the *Heart Sutra* continues:

> Thus, the Boddhisattva Avalokitesvara overcame all ills and suffering.

Furthermore, the principle that the Dharma-body – while being the basis of all marks – is completely apart from such marks as birth, extinction, impermanence, permanence, existence and emptiness, conforms very much to the Truth. Hence the name "True Mark."

This True Mark is common to sentient beings and Buddhas, but ordinary humans, as well as followers of the Two Vehicles, deludedly reject it and therefore cannot take advantage of it. It is as though you had a diamond sewn into the hem of your shirt but, unaware of it, must endure poverty and deprivation.

To awaken to the Way (experience a Great Awakening) is to be in a state of thorough understanding, like the clouds dissipating to expose the moon, the shutters thrown open to reveal the mountain range; it is like someone with clear vision recognizing the way home, or a tramp unexpectedly discovering a treasure trove.

To achieve Enlightenment is like following a well-trodden path home, dusting off your feet and sitting down to rest; it is like taking treasures from the trove to spend as you wish.

Once truly *awakened to the Way*, an ordinary being endowed with the Bodhi Mind achieves a level of insight and understanding equal to that of the Buddhas. As far as *attaining Enlightenment* is concerned, the Bodhisattvas of the first "ground" do not know the comings and goings of those of the next "ground." Understanding the meaning of awakening to the Way and attainment of Enlightenment, you naturally do not become arrogant toward those at a higher level, nor do you develop a mind of retrogression. Rather, your determination to achieve rebirth in the Pure Land cannot be restrained, not even by ten thousand buffaloes!

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Look at the times we are in. The flames of war are now raging. There is fighting between north and south, insurrection and strife are spreading within China and abroad, the number of dead over the last three or four years can be counted in the millions – we have not heard of such tragedies throughout history. Moreover, disasters such as typhoons, floods, earthquakes and epidemics occur with alarming frequency. Sometimes drought and flooding both create havoc several times within a single year. Because of these events, prices have more than doubled.

At times like these, it is a feat just to remain alive; how dare you fail to redouble your efforts at uninterrupted Buddha Recitation, seeking rebirth in the Pure Land? How can you waste this human body, so difficult to obtain, dreaming of methods which are not suitable for the times? If you do not strive to concentrate on this one method now, I fear that in the future, you will no longer have the unique opportunity to encounter such a straightforward, sublime shortcut!

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Letter 18

Buddha Recitation and Mantras[18]

The Pure Land practitioner may recite mantras as well as the Buddha's name. However, he should make a clear distinction between the main and the subsidiary practice – in which case the subsidiary practice naturally points to the main practice. If, on the other hand, he is careless and considers the two practices to be equal, even the main practice is no longer the main practice!

The Ten-Thousand-Arm Avalokitesvara Mantra (Cundi Dharani) is neither more nor less efficacious than the Great Compassion Mantra. If the mind is utterly sincere, each and every Dharma method elicits a wonderful response; if the mind is not utterly sincere, no method is effective.

A single recitation of the Buddha's name encompasses all the teachings of the Tripitaka. It includes all methods in full without omitting a single method.

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Only those who are well-versed in all Buddhist traditions and teachings can be true Buddha Recitation practitioners. On the other hand, the dull, who are ignorant of everything but how to follow instructions sincerely, can also become true practitioners. Outside of these two groups, the correctness of practice depends on the cultivator's diligence and on whether or not he is practicing in accordance with the teachings.

Since you are already determined and have no further doubts about Pure Land practice, why inquire about the results that other practitioners obtain? Even if no one else in the whole world obtains results, you should not develop a single thought of doubt. This is because the true words of Buddha Sakyamuni and the Patriarchs should be proof enough.

If you continually inquire about the results other practitioners obtain, it means that you lack complete faith in the Buddha's words – and thus your practice certainly cannot bring results. The wise must not abandon the words of the Buddhas to follow those of human beings. Those who have no firm position and are only guided by the results of others are greatly to be pitied!

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[18]Letter to another layman in Yungchia. (Chinese ed. Vol. I, p. 134)

Letter 19

Mind-Only Pure Land[19]

The main tenets of the Pure Land method are Faith, Vows and Practice. Like a three-legged incense burner, if it lacks one leg, it cannot stand. You have diligently practiced Buddha Recitation and have no more doubts about the first criterion of Faith. However, you seem to be attached to the idea that there is a dichotomy between Vows and Practice. You therefore cannot have complete understanding and synthesis.

Thus, within the unimpeded, perfect and wonderful Dharma, there suddenly arise numerous impediments and obstacles, causing the bright moon, adorned with ten thousand halos, of Elder Masters Ch'e Wu, Chien Mi and Ou I to pull apart and divide. All this is due simply to a fine silk thread before your eyes. How regrettable!

The true Pure Land practitioner always fully combines the three criteria of Faith, Vows and Practice during recitation. He is like an infant longing for his mother. When, lonely and crying, he searches for her, he certainly never lacks Faith or the desire (Vow) to see her. Therefore, why do you ask whether "Vows and Practice come separately or together"? Why do you say such things as "with Vows, it is difficult to focus the mind completely," or "in Buddha Recitation, one can neither have Vows and Practice concurrently nor non-concurrently"? This is creating problems where there are none!

From your letter, and from the line of reasoning of the monk [from Hangchou], it would appear that neither of you really knows how to practice Buddha Recitation properly. You are just like someone who has not begun his journey but is already thinking of what it will be like when he returns home.

Therefore, you take the very Dharma pronouncements of ancient masters – which were designed to counteract differentiation and discrimination – to create yet more differentiation! Let me ask you this question: Can you really reach the stage of "no Buddha outside Mind, no Mind outside Buddha" without utmost earnestness? Can you really reach that stage without Faith and Vows? While Elder Masters Ch'e Wu and Chien Mi may differ in words, their ideas actually reinforce and complement one another. To reduce them to a question of "whether Vows and Practice are separate or together" is to lack the eye of discernment in the Dharma!

[19]Letter to a layman. (Chinese ed. Vol. I, p. 149)

As for the words of Elder Master Ou I, they represent a Dharma medicine intended for those cultivators who, following Zen practice, meditate on the Self-Nature Amitabha and the Mind-Only Pure Land. They are not cultivating in accordance with Pure Land tenets, but merely seek an undisturbed mind as the ultimate goal. This aim is something external to the Pure Land method; why do you bring it up here and compare it to the criteria of complete Faith and Vows of genuine cultivation – thus creating opportunities for confusion?

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So far, I have spoken in general, basing myself on principle and noumenon. On the level of practice and phenomena, the Vow for rebirth in the Pure Land should be made early in the morning and again at night after recitation is completed [using one of the available Vow compositions]. You should realize that reading the text of the Vow is to rely on that text to make your own Vow – do not think that reading through the text once is equivalent to making the Vow!

Except for morning and evening, when you make your Vow for rebirth in the Pure Land, it is enough merely to recite the Buddha's name with utmost sincerity.

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Letter 20

Do Not Mistake a Thief for Your Son![20]

I am delighted to learn from your letter that you are deeply devoted to the Way. However, because of numerous commitments, including the need to review a commentary, my answer to you has been somewhat delayed.

Greed, anger and delusion are afflictions common to everyone. However, if you are aware that they are diseases, their power should not be overwhelming. They are like thieves who have broken into the house. If the owner mistakes them for members of the household, all the valuables in the house will be stolen. If, on the other hand, he recognizes the thieves as such and immediately chases them away, his valuables will be safeguarded and he will be at peace. In this connection, the ancients have said:

> Fear not the early arising of thoughts [greed, anger, delusion, etc.]; fear only the late awareness of them as such.

When greed, anger and delusion arise, as long as you recognize them for what they are, these thoughts will immediately be destroyed. If, however, you take them for the true masters of your household, it is no different from mistaking a thief for your son. How can your riches not be squandered and lost?

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Your Buddha Recitation is not earnest because you have not learned to recognize the Saha World as a place of suffering and the Western Pure Land as a realm of joy. You should think thus: "It is difficult to obtain a human rebirth, it is difficult to be reborn in a 'central land,' it is difficult to hear the Dharma and even more difficult to encounter and learn about the Pure Land method. If I do not recite the Buddha's name singlemindedly now, once the ghost of impermanence arrives, I am bound to descend upon the three Evil Paths in accordance with the heavy evil karma of this life or of past lives, subject to long periods of suffering, with no liberation in sight." If you keep these thoughts constantly in mind, you will awaken and be earnest.

[20]Letter to Ch'en Hui-ch'ao. (Chinese ed. Vol. I, p. 161)

Moreover, you should think about the sufferings of the various hells and develop the Bodhi Mind. The Bodhi Mind is the Mind striving to benefit oneself and others. Once this Mind develops, it is like a tool which has been electrified; it acquires tremendous power and speed. No ordinary virtues of good roots can compare with it in severing karmic obstructions and increasing merits and wisdom.

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You are swayed by the environment and external circumstances because your cultivation is still shallow. Therefore, whenever you are affected by feelings of anger or joy, or have evil or wholesome thoughts, such states of mind show clearly on your face. If your mind is filled with correct thoughts, all afflictions will decrease naturally. Therefore, although he may be dwelling in the prison of Birth and Death, the true cultivator always trains himself strenuously. As a result, afflictions and karmic habits are gradually eliminated. This is true cultivation. In this way the mind becomes master of itself, thus escaping the influence and control of external circumstances.

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Laymen like yourself, residing at home [unlike monks and nuns] can practice as you wish. You may recite the Buddha's name sitting, standing, kneeling or circumambulating the altar, etc. but you should not be attached to any set ways.

If you become attached to a fixed position, your body may tire easily and your mind may find it difficult to merge with the Mind of the Buddhas. To reap benefits, you should make allowances for your health or habits and skillfully select the practice that fits your circumstances.

Traditionally, Pure Land practitioners circumambulate the altar at the beginning of a Buddha Recitation session, then sit down and, finally, kneel. However, if you feel tired when circumambulating or kneeling, you should sit down and recite. If you become drowsy while seated, you can circumambulate the altar or recite standing up, waiting for the drowsiness to go away before sitting down again. When reciting, it is better to determine the length of the session with a clock rather than fingering a rosary, as doing so may make it difficult to focus the mind and keep it empty and pure.

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Letter 21

Buddhism and the Tao[21]

The Taoist Master "Ocean Corpse" recently conveyed your letter to me. From reading it, I learned that you have been practicing Taoism assiduously for a long time and that your achievements are profound. That you are now inquiring into the Pure Land method, which is the foremost practice in Buddhism, demonstrates that in previous lifetimes, you planted deep, wholesome roots in the Buddha Dharma. That is why you have not followed the grasping view of the God of Water, but, out of the ocean of teachings, have learned to seek the shore of Ultimate Liberation.

Since you are acquainted with Master Ocean Corpse, why not seek instruction from him; why leave the lofty, bright ground he represents for a low, dark place? Is it not turning your back on your hopes and aspirations? The Taoist Master Ocean Corpse was originally well-versed in Buddhist teachings and schools, has practiced both Zen and Pure Land and is no less than the boat of Great Vows in the sea of Birth and Death. Because of his modesty, he adopted the name "Corpse." In truth, anyone who encounters such a corpse in the sea of Birth and Death will, without doubt, speedily reach the other shore and peacefully return home. Is it not better to approach him than to ask a lowly monk who lacks full understanding of the Dharma?

Nevertheless, since you had the poor judgement to have inquired of me, I shall, for my part, reply to you in accordance with my shallow opinions. Hopefully, my answers may assuage some of your doubts!

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I venture to think that, in their essence, Buddhism and Taoism spring from the same source. However, their various schools differ greatly in their practices today. Buddhism teaches us, first of all, to practice the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, that is, to contemplate the body as impure, all feelings as suffering, the [ordinary] mind as impermanent and all phenomena as devoid of self. When we realize that body, feelings, mind and phenomena are impure, the source of suffering, impermanent, without self, false, dream-like and illusory, the True Thusness Nature will manifest itself.

[21]Letter to Li Yin-sou. (Chinese ed. Vol. I, p. 163)

Buddhism encompasses all methods and dharmas. Not only does it clearly explain the issues of body, mind and life, it does not neglect the small issues of human morality, such as "filiality, respect for elders, loyalty, faith, propriety, justice, decency and shame." An exception is the practice of "balancing energy currents," about which not a single word is said in the Buddha Dharma. Not only that, Buddhism forbids the practice entirely. This is because while Taoism regards the preservation of body and mind as an ideal, Buddhism, on the contrary, teaches that body and mind are intrinsically false, born of conditions, disappearing also through conditions. They are not the Self-Nature True Mind.

From your letter, it seems that you already know that "Immortals" have a definite life-span while the Buddha's life is without limit. Therefore, now that you are advanced in age, you should diligently practice the Pure Land method. Keep your investigation of Zen and other teachings to a minimum, as these methods are broad and profound and not easy to study. Even if you were to reach the ultimate source, you would still need to return to the Pure Land method to resolve the problem of Birth and Death in this very lifetime.

You should read the Pure Land sutras and commentaries without delay and practice in accordance with their teachings – with deep faith in the words of the Buddhas and Patriarchs. Do not develop doubts when you encounter something you cannot yet understand. If you are utterly sincere in your Faith, Vows and Practice, you will naturally be able to rely on the compassionate power of Amitabha Buddha to achieve rebirth in the Pure Land. Once reborn you will be close to Amitabha Buddha, in the company of the Ocean-Wide Assembly and gradually attain the fruit of Non-Birth and the rank of a One-Life Bodhisattva. At that time, looking back at your original intention of becoming an Immortal in the assembly of the Lord Brahma, and comparing it to your current status, you will discover that the two are as different as a dark ravine from the blue yonder!

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"Sarira" is a Sanskrit word translated as "relics", "remains of the body." It also means "miraculous remains," which are the crystallization of the cultivation of precepts, concentration and wisdom and not the result of "balancing energy currents." It is the symbolic mark of the cultivator who has reached the state of union between Mind and Buddha. However, Buddhist relics do not come only from the transformation of flesh, bones and hair during cremation, but also derive from many other circumstances.

For example, once upon a time, an Elder Master, while bathing, suddenly obtained some relics. A Zen Master, having a tonsure, saw his hair turn into a string of relics. There are instances of relics emerging from the mouths of practitioners earnestly reciting the Buddha's name. A printer setting the text of a famous

Pure Land commentary saw relics among the wooden typefaces. A laywoman embroidering Buddhist images and sutras found relics under her needle point. In another case, a practitioner who had returned from afar and was wholeheartedly paying respect before his altar, suddenly saw relics emerging from one of the statues. These accounts demonstrate that relics are due to the power of cultivation [not internal energy currents].

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The Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara (Kuan Yin) has, since time without beginning, been a Buddha with the name of True Dharma Light. While residing in the Land of Eternal Stillness, because of Her boundless concern and compassion, She also appears in all lands and realms. Standing beside Amitabha Buddha, She also manifests Herself everywhere, as Buddha, Bodhisattva, Arhat, Pratyeka Buddha, or takes the form of various beings along the Six Paths in the Dharma Realm of the ten directions. She accomplishes whatever deeds are of benefit to sentient beings and takes whatever form is necessary to rescue them and teach them the Dharma.

P'u T'o Mountain is the place associated with this Bodhisattva. In order to provide sentient beings with a focal point to express their sincerity, the Bodhisattva manifested Her Parinirvana (earthly demise) on this mountain.

This does not mean that the Bodhisattva resides only on P'u T'o Mountain and not elsewhere. As an analogy, the single moon in the sky appears in ten thousand rivers and lakes. From the oceans to the tiniest dewdrops, wherever there is limpid water, the moon appears. However, if the water is turbid or muddy, the image of the moon will be blurred or hidden. Our Mind-Nature is similar to the water. If sentient beings concentrate singlemindedly on the Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara, She employs all kinds of expedients, favorable or unfavorable, hidden or overt, to bring them benefits. If, on the other hand, the cultivator is not utterly sincere and singleminded in his recitation, his "mind water" will be turbid and it will be difficult for him to obtain a response. The meaning of this is very profound. If you read the section on P'u T'o Mountain in my compendium of letters you will understand this yourself.

The Bodhisattva, in the *causal stage*, "visualized" (concentrated on) the nature of hearing and thus attained perfect, all-pervading power. In the *result stage* (as a Bodhisattva), She visualizes the voices of sentient beings calling upon Her and goes to their rescue – hence the name "Regarder of the Cries of the World." Moreover, the Bodhisattva's methods are boundless and all-encompassing. She preaches every kind of method to teach and transform sentient beings in accordance with their individual capacities and nature, without insisting on any particular Dharma method. Therefore, Her approach is called "all-sided."

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What I have just discussed are some "superficial" issues, which you are not familiar with because you have not examined them. My answers have followed the order of your questions. In fact, these answers do not cover the Pure Land method, a teaching that can bring you full benefits. However, if I were to give a more detailed explanation, I fear it would be lengthy and waste more paper and ink. You should obtain and read the *Longer Amitabha Sutra*, the *Meditation Sutra*, the *Biographies of Pure Land Sages and Saints* ... These books provide a full explanation of the theory and practice of cultivation and attainment.

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Letter 22

Cultivate, Do Not Verbalize![22]

The tenets of the Pure Land method are Faith, Vows and Practice. Only with true Faith and earnest Vows can Practice be assiduous and pure. The common disease of sentient beings is to be diligent and earnest when catastrophe strikes but lax and remiss in normal times.

However, living in this current period is no different from lying peacefully on a huge pile of dried wood under which a fire has already started. Though it has not yet reached the body, in no time flames and smoke will cover everything, leaving no possibility of escape. If you are indifferent or careless, remiss in seeking help through reciting the Buddha's name, your understanding and perception are shallow indeed!

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When cultivating various Dharma methods, you must reach the level of "development of true practice, perfection of understanding" before you can receive real benefits. This is not unique to the Visualization Method of Pure Land. In Zen, a meaningless koan (kung an) becomes the "very life and mind" of the cultivator; he puts his entire mind and thought into it, constantly meditating on it, oblivious to the passage of time, be it days or months, until he reaches the point of extinguishing all discriminating, delusive views with respect to internal and external realms. Only then does he achieve Great Awakening. Is this not "development of true practice, perfection of understanding"?

The Sixth Patriarch of Zen has said:

> Simply by reading the *Diamond Sutra*, we can illumine our Mind and see our True Nature.

Is this not also "development of true practice, perfection of understanding"?

The word "development" should be understood here as "[developing to] the utmost." Only by striving to the utmost can the cultivator forget altogether about body, mind and the world around him, remaining completely still and tranquil, as though of one hue.

[22] Letter to the layman Fan Ku-nung. (Chinese ed. Vol. I, p. 174)

If your cultivation has not reached the highest level, you may practice Visualization and Recitation, but you will still be making the distinction between subject and object (yourself and the Buddhas). You will be engaged in an entirely mundane, ordinary activity, entirely within the realm of discriminatory views and understanding. How can you, then, achieve true benefits? That is why, when the ancients were in meditation, their mind and thoughts were like withered trees. Thus, their lofty conduct was known far and wide and later generations continue to admire and esteem them. These benefits are all due to the single word "utmost."

People today prefer empty talk; few care to cultivate. Pure Land should include both theory and practice, with a definite emphasis on practice. Why? It is because for the person who thoroughly comprehends theory, all of practice is theory – practicing all day at the phenomenal level is practicing at the noumenon level.

When those who lack clear understanding of noumenon and phenomena hear the words "practice at the noumenal level," they consider the meaning to be profound and sublime. They also find it consonant with their lazy, lethargic minds, which loathe the effort and difficulties of Buddha Recitation. Thus, they immediately grasp at noumenon and abandon the phenomenal. Little do they realize that when the phenomenal aspect is abandoned, noumenon becomes hollow and meaningless as well! I hope that you will explain cultivation at both the phenomenal and noumenal levels to everyone, counselling them accordingly. The benefits will be great indeed!

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Letter 23

This Mind is the Buddha[23]

There are, in general, four methods of Pure Land practice: oral recitation (Holding the Name), contemplation of a Buddha image, Visualization (contemplation by thought) and True Mark Recitation.

Among the four methods, oral recitation has the broadest appeal. It is not only easy to practice, it does not lead to "demonic events."

If you wish to practice the Visualization method, you should carefully read the *Meditation Sutra* and clearly understand such principles as "This Mind is the Buddha," "If the mind is pure, the Buddha appears," "All realms and states are Mind-Only, there should be no attachment to them." Once you understand that realms and states do not come from the outside and avoid developing attachments to them, these states then become more sublime and the mind grows purer and more focussed. If you reach that point, the benefits of Visualization are significant.

On the other hand, if you are unfamiliar with the realms visualized and have not comprehended the essence of the Dharma, but are over-eager to see [auspicious] realms, everything is delusion. Not only are you not in communion with the Buddhas, you even begin to create the causes of demonic events (hallucinate). This is because the more eager you are to see realms, the more agitated and deluded your mind becomes.

Since from the outset, you have failed to apply your mind correctly, you will not be able to realize that these realms are demonic apparitions. Therefore, you are overcome with joy; your thoughts and feelings are not peaceful and calm. Taking advantage of this, demons will cloud your mind and plunder your Self-Nature. At that point, even if a living Buddha were to appear, He would have no way of rescuing you!

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You should, therefore, take your capacities and circumstances into consideration and not aim for what is too lofty and beyond your reach – seeking benefits only to receive harm. The Patriarch Shan Tao has said:

[23]Letter to the layman Wu Hsi-chen. (Chinese ed. Vol. I, p. 177)

> "Sentient beings in the Dharma-Ending Age have agitated, inverted minds. Visualizing lofty realms with such coarse minds is certainly difficult to accomplish!"

Therefore, the Great Sage [Buddha Sakyamuni] took pity and specifically recommended oral recitation because He feared that those who were not skillful in using their minds would be lost in demonic realms.

Cultivation through oral recitation is very easy. To achieve rebirth in the Pure Land, you need only ensure that singleminded thought follows singleminded thought. Moreover, utmost sincerity and earnestness are also wonderful methods to treat the deluded mind and demonic realms.

You should think this over carefully and strive with all your mental strength to cultivate.

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Letter 24

The Bodhi Mind[24]

I just received your letter and am glad to learn that you have finally recovered from your long illness! The great issue of Birth and Death, the swiftness with which the ghost of impermanence can strike – these are things which we have all heard of and fear, but only when we have actually had a near-death experience, do these realities truly hit home.

You should, therefore, develop the great Bodhi Mind and refer to your own circumstances to counsel your family, your friends and all who have the right conditions. Only in this manner can the benefits spread far and wide.

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You wrote that you suffered from overexertion as a result of reciting the Buddha's name too rapidly and hurriedly. This is, of course, because your were not skillful. Buddha Recitation should be practiced according to one's strength; it can be done silently or audibly, softly or loudly. Why did you insist on reciting in such a loud voice that you became exhausted and fell ill?

Although the immediate cause of your grave illness was shortness of breath, if you look deeper, the underlying cause must really have been the force of evil karma accumulated from time immemorial. Your diligent Buddha Recitation must have transformed future karma into current karma, heavy karma into light karma. You should not grow discouraged or develop doubts. Who knows how many eons of transgressions along the three Evil Paths have been erased by this single illness! The Buddhas' power is difficult to imagine, their compassion is difficult to repay! You should rejoice, feel great remorse and develop stronger faith.

From now on, you should cultivate diligently and counsel others to practice Buddha Recitation, so that those near and far may achieve rebirth in the Western Pure Land. This is precisely the way to avoid ingratitude toward the Buddhas, who, through your illness, have awakened you.

[24]Letter to the layman Liu Chih-k'ung. (Chinese ed. Vol. I, p. 181)

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There is no need to come to P'u T'o Mountain, considering the travel expenses involved. Reciting the Buddha's name at home will bring progress and results just as easily, while saving money and preserving your health. Is it not better that way?

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Letter 25

Self-power/Other-power[25]

I see from your letter that you have developed faith and wish to take refuge in the Buddhas and their teachings. When taking refuge in the Triple Jewel, however, you should cease all evil actions, perform wholesome deeds, fulfill your moral obligations, develop Faith and Vows and practice Buddha Recitation, seeking rebirth in the Pure Land. You should also refrain from killing, protect sentient beings and be vegetarian several days a month. If you cannot yet eat frugally all the time, at least do not be too demanding in your diet. In this way, you will not go counter to the compassionate Mind of the Buddhas.

Since your name is "Precious Wood," I shall give you the Dharma name "Verdant Wisdom." This is because the Mind-Nature is like a tree; when consumed by the fire of afflictions, it withers and dries up. Once you have wisdom, afflictions will not arise and the tree of the Mind-Nature grows naturally healthy and verdant.

If you wish to receive the five lay precepts, you should, first of all, examine your mind. If you believe that you can keep the precepts without transgressing, you may ask the layman Hua San about self-administration of the precepts before your altar; he will be glad to instruct you.

Having now returned to the Dharma, you should read my compendium of letters carefully and follow closely the teachings described therein. Only then will you avoid being deceived by misguided persons into seeking merits and blessings in future lives or trying to become an Immortal through the practice of balancing energy currents. If you truly understand the teachings set out in my compendium, no externalist can cause you to vacillate. Do not doubt the words in the compendium. You should realize that they are based on the essence of the sutras or the enlightened words of the Patriarchs and other Dharma teachers. I did not invent these teachings. If you reflect carefully upon what I have just said, you will receive great benefits.

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Your aspirations are as lofty as the heavens, while your will is as low as the ground. Although you claim to follow my teachings, you are, in fact, merely

[25]Letter to the layman Chou Chih-mao. (Chinese ed. Vol. I, p. 182)

pursuing your own biased views. Faith constitutes the very basic of Pure Land teaching. With solid Faith, even those guilty of the Five Transgressions and the Ten Evil Deeds can achieve rebirth in the Pure Land. Without solid Faith, even those fully versed in the various schools and teachings have no hope of escaping Birth and Death – unless they have severed all delusive karma.

You are not yet versed in the various schools and teachings. Therefore, you cannot rely on your own strength (self-power) to eradicate karmic delusion and transcend Birth and Death. Now, if you do not believe that the power of the Buddhas and the virtues of the Self-Nature are boundless, how can you achieve liberation?

You should know that no one who seeks rebirth in the Pure Land with deep and earnest Faith and Vows will fail to achieve it. Buddha Recitation is the perfect shortcut to escape from the wasteland of Birth and Death. You do not even realize the loftiness of this method, yet harbor the ambition to study the treatise *Awakening of the Faith*. Although this treatise presents the essence of the Dharma, it is not too helpful for those of limited capacities and shallow roots. Even if you study and understand it thoroughly, severing all doubts, once you begin practicing, you must still follow the method of reciting the Buddha's name seeking rebirth in the Pure Land. This is the only prudent, safe course. As for the Consciousness, Zen and Sutra Studies schools, how can you expect to grasp all their subtlety and profundity?

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Your mind has such high aspirations but you do not know how to adjust their loftiness to your capacities! Yet you also think that "with humble, limited capacities, it is difficult to achieve rebirth in the Pure Land; to avoid sinking into the Three Evil Realms is enough cause for rejoicing." Little do you realize that without rebirth in the Pure Land, you will, in the future, descend upon the three Evil Paths [hells, hungry ghosts, animality]. Ideas such as yours fail to conform to the teachings of the Buddhas and are contrary to my own advice. How can you then say that you are "following my words and singlemindedly reciting the Buddha's name"?

You are currently engaged in an ordinary profession and do not yet have a lofty, magnanimous character. Thus, such high determination will only make others sigh and laugh. You should completely abandon your ambition to become a great scholar, concentrating instead on studying the Pure Land sutras. Reread the letters I sent to Kao Shao-lin and Miss Hsu and practice accordingly. You should not look at your humble, limited capacities and consider rebirth in the Western Pure Land as too lofty and beyond your reach. You should cling to the Buddha's name as to your life and mind, holding fast all times without letting go. Moreover, you should keep your thoughts and actions in conformity with the tenets of Buddhism, that is, put

a stop to all evil actions and practice all wholesome deeds. In addition, if you still have spare time, you may recite sutras and mantras, but always keep in mind the need for utter sincerity. Do not rush to fathom meaning and substance. If you rush to understand everything at the outset and do not concentrate on utterly sincere recitation of the Buddha's name and the sutras, even thorough understanding will bring no true benefits – not to mention that, to begin with, understanding is difficult.

As far as the Consciousness, Zen and Sutra Studies methods are concerned, even if you pursue them all your life, you will find it difficult to grasp their profound essence. Even if you do, you will still have to sever delusive karma completely to escape Birth and Death. When speaking of this, I fear that your dream will not come true and will remain just that – a dream!

You have not read my compendium carefully enough and, therefore, your words rise as high as the Milky Way and then descend to the depths of the ocean. In the compendium, I frequently refer to the sutras and commentaries that should be read, how to go about reading them and the difficulty of benefitting from the Consciousness, Zen and Sutra Studies methods. This is because the Pure Land method calls upon the compassionate power of Amitabha Buddha (other-power), while other methods rely on self-power, self-cultivation alone.

Dharma doors other than Pure Land are ordinary methods. They resemble the approach of a scholar in everyday life who, through his own talents and virtues, becomes an official of high or low rank. The Pure Land method is a special teaching – just like a prince who, right at birth, is more honored than courtiers or ministers. Thus, methods based on self-power and those based on other-power cannot be compared. Should not ordinary beings, full of karmic afflictions, exercise caution in the selection of a method of cultivation?

You admit that human beings have a limited life-span and that your own real strength is limited. Why, then, continue to pursue such lofty ambitions? If you can become a great scholar, it will be a great honor for Buddhism. My only fear is that if you do not succeed and do not have firm faith in the Pure Land method either, you will fail on both accounts. Furthermore, if you do accrue some limited virtues in this life, in the next life you will certainly be reborn within the cycle of worldly blessings and merits. Think this over: among the wealthy and noble, how many can avoid creating evil karma?

Today the fate of the nation is in great peril and the people are in misery. This is all due to the influence of the merits and blessings of those, who, in previous lifetimes, cultivated without wisdom. Once having gone astray and having been reborn in the Triple Realm, how can you ensure that you will not be deluded and descend upon the three Evil Paths? If you do not achieve rebirth in the Pure Land, it may be possible to escape perdition for one lifetime, but to do so for two lifetimes is rare indeed!

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Sakyamuni Buddha taught a great many sutras and mantras. No one can recite and uphold them all. Therefore, ancient masters selected only a few important ones for use in daily recitation. [Among these important sutras and mantras are the *Heart Sutra*, the *Amitabha Sutra*, the *Longer Repentance Liturgy*, the Surangama Mantra, the Great Compassion Mantra, the Ten Mantras.] Regardless of which sutra or mantra is recited, to be in accord with the tenets of Pure Land you should include recitation of the Buddha's name and dedicate the merits to rebirth in the Pure Land ... You should know that the very words "Amitabha Buddha," if recited to the level of one-pointedness of mind, have ample power to lead sentient beings to Buddhahood. Do you really think that reciting the *Amitabha Sutra* and the Buddha's name cannot eliminate "fixed karma"?

The Dharma is like money. It is up to the individual to use it wisely. To those with money, many courses of action are open. If you can concentrate on cultivating one method, whatever you wish will be fulfilled. Why insist upon reciting this mantra or that sutra to accrue this or that merit, but not other merits? If you follow my instructions in a flexible way, you will naturally "understand one thing and penetrate one hundred things." If not, even if I speak at length, your mind will not be focussed and you will not obtain any benefits!

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It is taught in the sutras:

> There are two types of heroes in this world: those who do not commit transgressions and those who, having done so, are capable of repentance.

The word "repentance" should spring from the depth of the mind. If you do not truly repent and change your ways, whatever you say is useless. It is like reading the label on a medicine bottle but refusing to take the medicine. How can your illness be cured? If you take the medicine according to instructions, the disease will certainly be cured – with body and mind calm and at peace. I only fear for those who, lacking strong and determined will, put things out in the sun to warm for one day and then let them freeze for ten days. All they get is empty fame and no true benefits!

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I vow that when my life approaches its end,
all obstacles will be swept away;
I will see Amitabha Buddha,
And be born in his Land of Ultimate Bliss and Peace.

When reborn in the Western Land,
I will perfect and completely fulfill
Without exception these Great Vows,
To delight and benefit all beings.

The Vows of Samantabhadra

Realms of worlds in empty space might reach an end,
And living beings, karma and afflictions be extinguished;
But they will never be exhausted,
And neither will my vows.

The Vows of Samantabhadra

Dedication of Merit

May the merit and virtue
accrued from this work
adorn Amitabha Buddha's Pure Land,
repay the four great kindnesses above,
and relieve the suffering of
those on the three paths below.

May those who see or hear of these efforts
generate Bodhi-mind,
spend their lives devoted to the Buddha Dharma,
and finally be reborn together in
the land of Ultimate Bliss.
Homage to Amitabha Buddha!

Namo Amitabha

南無阿彌陀佛